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M A G A Z I N E

JANUARY 1993

Pagan Island

A Christmastime Murder Mystery

by Robert Halsted

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"We're looking for people

"Writing for children is the perfect way to begin," says the author of 53 children's books. "Your ideas come right out of your own experience. And while it's still a challenge, it's the straightest possible line between you and publication—if you're qualified to seek the success this rewarding field offers."

By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

IF you want to write and get published, I can't think of a better way to do it—than writing books and stories for children and teenagers. Ideas flow naturally right out of your own life experience. While it's still a challenge, the odds of getting that first unforgettable check from a juvenile publisher are better than they are from just about any other kind of publisher I know.

Later on, you may get checks from other publishers. But right now, the object is to begin—to break into print—to learn the feeling of writing and selling your work and seeing your name in type. After that, you can decide if you want your writing to take another direction.

But after 40 years of editing, publishing, and teaching—and 53 books of my own—I can tell you this: You'll go a long way before you discover anything as rewarding as writing for young readers.

The soaring children's market

Your words will never sound as sweet as they do from the lips of a child reading your books and stories. And the joy of creating books and stories that reach young people is an experience you'll never have anywhere else. But that's not

all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations because there's a huge market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over \$1.5 billion worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

And over 400 children's magazines rely on freelancers to fill each issue.

Yet two big questions bedevil nearly every would-be writer: "Am I really qualified?" and "How can I get started?"

"Am I really qualified?"

This is our definition of a "qualified person": It's someone with an aptitude for writing who can take constructive criticism, learn from it, and turn it into a professional performance. That's the only kind of person we're looking for at the Institute of Children's Literature. The reasons are simple: Our reputation is built on success, and if prospective students don't have the aptitude, we probably can't help them. And we tell them so. It's only fair to both of us.

To help us spot potential authors, we've developed a revealing test for writing aptitude. It's free, and we don't charge for our evaluation. But no one gets into the Institute without passing it. Those who pass receive our promise:

You will complete at least one manuscript ready to submit to a publisher by the time you finish the course

One-on-one training with your own instructor

I've learned a lot about writing for children and I love it. Now I'm passing my knowledge on to my students so they can profit from it. When I'm not writing my own books I spend my time at the Institute, a workshop for writers that does one thing and does it better than any other educational institution I know of: It trains qualified people to write for the young reader.

This is the way I work with my students, and my fellow instructors—all of whom are experienced writers or editors

Alvin Tresselt, Dean of Faculty, was Executive Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, the first editor of *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild.

to write children's books"

and your own pace—you send your assignment to me and I read it and I reread it to get everything out of it you've put into it. Then I edit your assignment with a well-tempered pencil, just the way a publishing house editor would—if he had the time. I return it along with a detailed letter explaining my comments. I tell you what your strong points are, what your weaknesses are, and just what you can do to improve. It's a matter of push and pull with each assignment. You push and I pull and between us both, you learn to write.

The proof of the pudding

This method really works. I wouldn't spend five minutes at it if it didn't. The proof of the pudding is that many students break into print even before they finish the course.

Connie Wooldridge, Philipsburg, PA, who has sold two stories to *Highlights for Children* says, "As an at-home mother of four, I have so appreciated the way the Institute is set up: it has provided me with the professional contact and guidance I needed to get a serious start as a writer without the hassles of babysitters, long drives, and hard deadlines."

"—finally...the support and direction I needed."

"The letter with the return of my first assignment was so kind and encouraging I started to cry," writes E.D. Mahr, Hinsdale, IL. "Here, finally, was the support and direction I needed."

Ken Fleming, Staten Island, NY who reports a sale to *Cricket Magazine* says, "To know that more than 120,000 children will be reading my words gives me a feeling of great satisfaction. Thank you all for giving me so much for so little."

To find qualified men and women with an aptitude for writing, we have prepared



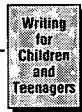
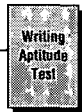
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EDITOR'S NOTES

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FICTION

The Knife

by Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by James Odbert

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The late October day was crisp and windless, the sun low, the evening chill already being felt in the shadow along the head-high hedge that ran down one side and along the rear of the yard.

Lysander leaned on his leaf rake under a low-limbed Japanese maple. The house and neighborhood had been Patti's choice; generous back yard with ample room for her flower and vegetable gardens, spacing around the homes, yet none so far apart that the houses were isolated. The isolation came from the trees, hedges, and shrubs that had grown up through the years.

The perennials in her flower garden had bloomed on schedule, but there had been no vegetable garden this year. Like the scraggly wild growth already showing among the flowers, the square, weed-spotted, mounded patch handy to the screened back porch testified that the tending hand was no more. Still surrounded by the low wire mesh fence Patti had insisted he put up to keep out the rabbit family that lived under one of the hedges, it should have been leveled and sodded and made part of the lawn, but that would have been too much like putting the final seal on her death. Next spring would be soon enough.

A methodical man, he liked to place his chores in order, not deviating from what he'd planned, and he'd planned to rake today. The only thing that could have kept him from it was rain. As it was, the windless day had allowed him to section the tree-surrounded yard into six areas and the afternoon's work had created piles of leaves in the center of five, waiting to be stuffed into trash bags. Even if there had been a gale, he'd have done what he'd planned to do, working downwind and bagging as he went.

One section to do, with just enough time before dark for the bagging. Not like the old days. Burning was no longer permitted. Save the atmosphere. But without that pungent odor drifting over the neighborhood, fall was no longer fall to those who remembered.

Fall was now those enormous plastic bags lined up at the curbs; shades of brown and green and orange, some printed with grinning pumpkin faces in celebration of Halloween. He wondered how long it would be before politicians realized that leaf bagging coincided with election time and handed out free bags spouting political slogans. Use the very thin cheap ones that Lysander did and you'd have low cost campaigning.

He plunged the rake into the crimson mat below the Japanese maple and felt the bamboos click against something hard. Delicately wielding the rake like an archaeologist unearthing a long-buried treasure, he scraped the leaves aside, already knowing what he'd find.

The knife was long and thin; bread knife from the look of it. If he'd been more diligent about his leaf raking, it would have turned up sooner, which didn't mean the police wouldn't be happy it had turned up now. Hell, after three weeks they were still building the case against Pollard and the trial was months away.

Macy's attitude toward the walnut and deep rug decor of the D.A.'s office was colored by the present occupant, who wore tailored silk suits—ice cream suits, Macy called them—and delicately curled blow-dried blond hair, and whose desk was always clean, since he'd arranged for nothing to cross it that wouldn't get his name in the paper. Favorably.

The ice cream man had been cast in the role by the party because of his appearance but he'd never learned the lines, although Macy didn't really be-

lieve the rumor that he'd once walked into a courtroom, looked at the judge, and whispered, "What's his job?"

Macy himself wore thick-soled brogans winter and summer, bought his slacks and shirts in K-mart when on sale, and replaced his coat only when it was damaged, which was seldom, concerned more about the price being right than the fit. If a tailor had run a tape measure around his big chest, Macy would have belted him for making indecent advances. His hair had been cut short for so many years it now refused to yield to comb and brush and sprouted in all directions.

Underwood, he of the hand-tailored silk suits, laced his fingers together and touched them to his lips.

Figures, thought Macy. He loves himself so much, he can't resist kissing himself now and then to see if he's real.

"Pollard killed her," said Underwood. "All the motive and opportunity in the world. She was playing around, everyone knew that. A moron could come up with a better story than coming home and finding her dead after he spent the evening crawling from one bar to another. Who saw him? No one. Who remembered him? No one."

Macy glanced at Ziagos, whose sartorial standards were on a par with his but more spectacular, and whose brain was capable of those trains of thought that had brought civilization to the world.

"Pollard is the type no one ever remembers," said Ziagos. "Funny thing about God. If He gives you something, He takes something away. He gave Pollard twice the brains of the average person but half the guts. I can see him standing at a bar. Someone elbows him aside, and he smiles and moves away. Who remembers a guy with the personality of wet tissue paper?"

"Who else could have done it?" asked Underwood.

Macy grunted. "How about one of the guys she was playing house with?"

"How about a motive for one of the guys she was playing house with?" Underwood countered.

"Well, Ziagos and I put in ten years with the county C.I.D. before coming over to the D.A.'s office and never came across anyone like the Pollard woman."

Ziagos grinned. "She not only strayed from the path of righteousness, she blazed new trails."

"She wasn't just playing around," said Macy. "She was

playing Black Widow spider, but instead of eating her victims, she was taking them for cold hard cash. We got the story from a guy named Dolson. She didn't pick up just anyone. She made sure the guy was successful, had a wife and a couple of young kids. After a few weeks, she'd tell him she'd call his wife or scream rape if he didn't pay up. She took Dolson for five thousand. She could ruin him, his marriage, and his career and he knew it."

"Blackmail?"

"Pure extortion. A one time payment for services rendered. No way to prove it. She demanded cash. Doesn't show up in the Pollard bank account, of course. She probably squirreled it away somewhere under a different name although we could find no record in the house. She'd have hidden that, too, naturally."

"She never asked for more?"

"Paid her once, he said. Never heard from her again."

"Then how is that a motive? She took him, but it was over. Revenge for a wounded ego or for five thousand dollars won't fly."

"No motive for him, of course. For someone else."

"Sure. Pollard."

"Pollard says he knew nothing about the money. I believe him. He thought she was just

an ordinary, run-of-the-mill adultress. She could have put the sting on the wrong guy. The latest. Or I should say the last."

"Who was—"

"We don't know. She thumbed a man named Kilroy out of the house two months ago, and the neighbors have no idea who replaced him. Someone did. The M.E. says it appears she had sexual relations before she died, but no semen specimen." He threw up his hands. "Condoms. Think how that will work for Pollard at a trial. We need time to look for someone else."

The man who took four vacations a year, ostensibly to attend seminars on crime fighting while staying at the best hotels with an unlimited expense tab, said, "You're wasting taxpayer money. I'll give you one more day before we take it to the grand jury. We have motive, we have opportunity, we have blood on Pollard which he claims got there when he knelt beside her when he found her. That's enough for an indictment. Why can't you go with that?"

"According to the M.E., bruises indicate that someone could have grabbed her wrist and hand, turned the knife, and pushed it into her chest. It's questionable whether Pollard is strong enough to do some-

thing like that. If we'd found the knife, we'd know more, but we didn't. Whoever killed her took it with him. Lord knows where it is now."

"That blows that theory to hell, no matter what the M.E. says. Why would he take it if his prints weren't on it? Pollard could have struggled with her and won. Stranger things have happened, and he had all the time in the world to bury it somewhere before he called the police."

"Well, he didn't bury it anywhere close or we'd have turned it up. Be hard to convict him without the murder weapon."

"Do I care? All I need is the indictment before the election. By the time he goes to trial, no one will give a damn."

One thing he did have a talent for, thought Macy. Getting reelected.

Lysander turned the knife over with the rake. Its interment under the leaves hadn't affected it much. The stainless steel blade was still bright. Still showing a dark stain on some of the serrations close to the handle.

The police hadn't made much noise the night of the murder, but how much noise does it take to wake people living along a quiet, tree lined street

where the only sound is the purr of an occasional passing car? The subconscious stirs only when the purring stops but not enough to wake the sleeper. It takes the sound of several engines, the slamming of several car doors to break the pattern, to signal that something unusual is going on and it might pay to look.

The random distribution in the darkness under the trees, rather than the markings, said the vehicles were police cars. Arriving at any crime scene, the police had no time for the niceties of parking.

He'd slipped into his robe and slippers and gone out to his lawn, thinking that Patti would have enjoyed this. Not only because she'd liked to be on top of the neighborhood gossip, but police cars meant some poor unfortunate needed help and she'd always believed that God had placed her on earth to assist everyone in their hour of need.

Lights flicked on here and there. Other figures shuffled through the night like robed adherents of a cult drawn to a midnight ceremony, forming a loose ring around the cars and watching the police wander in and out of the house next to Lysander's.

The two Andersons, she with her hair up in curlers, squat

figure wrapped in a plaid robe, furry slippers on her feet, he bulking beside her like the other half of a matched set, moved up beside him.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"Dunno," he said.

"You think that maybe—"

"What?"

"You know. Once too often, one man too many? I mean, we all know you can't behave like that without getting into trouble. Pollard—"

"For all we know, someone had a heart attack," said Lysander.

Her chuckle was deep enough to be a man's. "Sure." She nudged her husband. "Heart attack."

They waited. Nothing seemed to be happening. Anderson grunted and plodded to a uniformed figure leaning against a police car and smoking a cigarette. After a few minutes, he plodded back.

"She's dead. Murdered. They'll be asking questions shortly," he said, "so if we want to get some sleep, get back in the house and turn off the lights, but expect them in the morning."

"I told you." His wife took his arm. "You have to go to work in the morning and I've got to get Randy off to school, so we'd better go. You, Lysander?"

"Soon," he said.

Figures began to melt away, driven indoors by the chill of the early October night or, like the Andersons, the necessity of facing an alarm clock in only a few hours.

When they brought out the body bag and placed it in a van, he went into his kitchen and made himself a cup of decaffeinated coffee.

He carried it with him when the door chimes sounded.

The policeman's name was Rather, one of those who'd answered his call when Patti had fallen. He remembered because the name was the same as the CBS newscaster.

"Mr. Lysander?"

Lysander held the door wide. "Come in."

"You know what happened next door?"

"I was told Mrs. Pollard had been murdered."

"Yessir, that's right. Mr. Pollard found the body when he came home. We—we have to ask the neighbors—you understand."

Lysander held up the cup. "Decaf. Like some?"

Rather grinned. "Wouldn't hurt."

They sat at the kitchen table.

"We think it happened about midnight, Mr. Lysander. See or hear anything that might help?"

He shook his head.

He continued to shake his head to more questions.

Rather finished his coffee and rose. "Thank you, Mr. Lysander. The detectives will be around in the morning, of course, you living next door and all. You understand."

At the door, Rather glanced up at the stairs to the second floor, turning his cap in his hands. "I was one of the—"

"I know," said Lysander.

"I'm sorry about your wife."

Rather was looking at the foot of the stairs, as if still seeing the sprawled figure, the blue plastic laundry basket and the scattered wash she'd been taking to the basement.

Lysander said, "Accidents happen."

Rather nodded. "The home is a dangerous place."

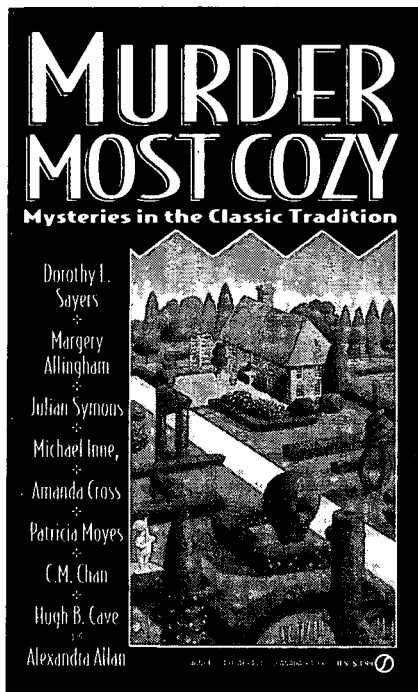
The next day, the two detectives, Macy and Ziagos, came and went. So did a wave of uniformed men who probed beneath the neighborhood's shrubs and hedges with metal detectors and swept aside the few early-fallen leaves on the lawns, while sanitation department trucks growled as crews cleaned out sewers in the vicinity. Looking for the knife that killed her, someone told Lysander.

Yes, he'd told the detectives, he'd seen men go into the

The butler wasn't the
only one whodunit.

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house. Thought nothing of it. He didn't have that kind of mind. For all he knew they were selling home improvements or insurance. Neither he nor his wife had a social relationship with the Pollards. Not much in common with a younger couple. Neighborly, that's all.

He'd seen no reason to mention the night two months ago when that subconscious had sensed something different in the pattern of night sounds and roused him. He'd looked down into the street to see the slight figure of Pollard on the sidewalk in front of his house.

Pollard would take a few quick steps toward his own house, hesitate, wring his hands, turn and suddenly scuttle up the street in retreat, stop and repeat his midnight choreography like a man telling himself there was something he should do but afraid to do it.

And then Pollard actually whimpered and ran up Lysander's driveway to the darkness alongside the house shortly before a starter clashed, an engine raced briefly, lights came on, and a car pulled away from the curb. Lysander had gone downstairs, out the back door, and softly called into the night. "Pollard?"

The dark shape of Pollard moved toward him.

The harshness of the drop light over the kitchen table spotlighted the terror in Pollard's eyes enormous behind his heavy-rimmed glasses, his face white, his lips and hands trembling.

Lysander poured an inch of bourbon into a tumbler. Pollard wrapped both hands around it and downed it.

"What's wrong?"

"I found them in the bedroom. He—she—they said they'd kill me if I didn't get out."

Another inch of bourbon disappeared as fast as the first.

Tears glistened in Pollard's eyes. "Not much of a man, am I? Find your wife in bed with another man and run."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. We're not all born to be Rambos."

"She'd have done it, understand? Threatened me with a knife. She's a monster."

"Why don't you simply walk the hell out on her?"

Pollard had clasped his hands together as if praying. "Can't, you see. Where would I go? My job—"

Pollard, he understood, was an electronics engineer. Worked in the research section of an electronics firm, creating new products. Brilliant. Probably be a VP some day. In a way, he was right. A man with a

brain like his could run, but he couldn't hide.

"Then give her some money and tell her to get the hell out."

Pollard's laugh was almost hysterical. "Some money? She wouldn't settle for *some* money. She wants it *all*, and the courts would give it to her, wouldn't they?"

They probably would. Too many times, the courts refused to recognize that the wife was more at fault than the husband. Better to consider them all as delicate flowers than to admit an occasional one was a rank weed in the garden of femininity.

Lysander poured him another half-inch of bourbon. "This is better? When you can't handle something, get out. See a lawyer in the morning and tell him to get rid of her no matter what it costs."

Pollard covered his face with his hands. "I—can't."

"Then she probably will kill you one day."

Pollard blinked.

"Unless you kill her first."

"You know," said Macy, "those other guys drove up in full view of the neighbors and used the front door, since they lived so far away it wasn't likely anyone would recognize them. Suppose it wasn't necessary for the last one to drive

and he used the back door?"

"Like someone in the neighborhood?"

"Could be. Now the neighbor on the other side would be screened by those pines, but Lysander would have a clear view. Dammit, over a two month period, he had to see something. Hell, maybe it was Lysander himself."

Ziagos grinned. "You kidding? He's thirty years older than she was, a retired widower just puttering around. All the others were young studs. What would she see in him?"

"Who knows, but he's a widower because his wife died in an accident a year ago. How often do two women living next door to each other die violent deaths? Let's talk to the man."

Two days after Pollard had run for his life, Lysander cursed softly when he'd seen what happened to the vegetable garden fence overnight. It looked as though one of the innumerable children, playing one of their innumerable games that involved chasing each other about, had run into it after dark. One side had been crumpled, tearing the end free from the post. The remaining strands of heavy wire projected. He bent them close to the post with his foot. Patti would have

insisted he fix it immediately, but Patti was no longer there and the chore would go on the bottom of his list to be taken care of next month, next year, next spring.

He'd scheduled other things for the day like transplanting the roses to a new flowerbed beside the house. The one they occupied lay like a finger across the lawn. Patti had wanted the bed there so she could see her roses from the kitchen window, but it broke the pattern of his mowing and forced him to jockey around with the mower.

There was no longer any point to putting up with the inconvenience, but he couldn't destroy the plants she'd cultivated so carefully. And perhaps that was why he was in no hurry to tear out the damaged fence, a simple job that would have taken only a few minutes. Both would have contributed to erasing her existence.

Thrusting the spade deep, he didn't see or hear Pollard come up, but there he was, hair wild, eyes magnified by the glasses, looking about as aggressive as one of the rabbits.

"He reminds me of my cousin Jack," Patti had said. "So smart he scares people, but he walks around with gravy stains on his tie, dog dirt on his shoes, and never knows the day of the week."

Lysander straightened. "What day is this?"

Pollard blinked. "Wednesday?"

"Thursday," said Lysander. "What do you want?"

Pollard cleared his throat. "What you said. About—killing—her? I—not me—I—couldn't. But there are—aren't there—people who—do that sort of thing?"

"So I hear," said Lysander. "You thinking of hiring one?"

"Well—"

Lysander sank the spade into the dirt and faced him. No question about it. She'd driven Pollard around the bend.

"You'd better think long and hard about that. Even if he was successful, you could end up far worse off than you are now. Open to blackmail and always the possibility that he'd be picked up for something else and trade you for a better deal for himself. Besides, where would you find someone to do it?"

"I thought—that—you—"

It was Lysander's turn to blink. "What in the hell made you think I'd know where you could hire a killer?"

Pollard wet his lips. "Some say—you weren't home—your wife—"

"It was an accident, you damned fool," said Lysander coldly. "Do what I told you to

do. Get a tough lawyer and let him handle it."

"I've—looked—into that."

"And?"

"He told me to—convert everything to—cash, change my name and—move to another state."

"You stumbled across a real fighter there. Probably graduated at the foot of his class and is so dumb he doesn't realize he should have chosen another line of work. Go see another."

Pollard looked over Lysander's shoulder and seemed to shrink.

Lysander turned.

She was standing on the deck, arms folded. Long, dark, flowing hair, not a bad looking woman, classic figure for a seductress; loose, jiggly. Heavily lidded eyes promising delights straight out of some ancient manual on sexual pleasure. To someone like Pollard, heaven; with not enough experience to know he'd end in hell.

"I—I've got to get back to—work." Pollard fled.

Lysander went over to the low hedge and looked up at her.

In the August heat she was wearing tight shorts and a band across her breasts and, amused, she read his eyes as they deliberately moved up her body to meet hers.

"Come in," she said.

*

Lysander wiped off the handle of the knife with his handkerchief and thrust it deep into the center of the half-full bag, packed the balance of the pile down tightly, twisted the top closed, and tied it off.

The six fat bags stood in a row, waiting to be carried to the curb to be picked up in the morning.

Macy and Ziagos came through the twilight. "Have a minute?" asked Macy.

Lysander waved at the bags. "Ten minutes ago, I'd have said no. What's on your mind?"

"Just want to be sure we're straight on something. You said you never paid any attention to what went on next door, but then maybe you were talking about men driving up and using the front entrance. Ever see anyone use the back door, one of the neighbors?"

Lysander shook his head. "During the day, no. At night? Look around. In a half hour you won't be able to see ten feet."

Ziagos scanned the backs of the houses. "Neither of you put in those yard lights, the kind that come on automatically at dusk? You should, you know. They cut down on burglaries, not to mention nutsos peeking in your back window or waiting for a woman to bring out the garbage."

"I'd been thinking about it before my wife died." Lysander shrugged. "No point now. If any fool wants to break in my house—good luck."

"What did you do before you retired?" asked Macy.

"Construction business. Used to subcontract some trucks."

Macy smiled. "That accounts for the muscles. You're in pretty good shape."

"I'll die eventually like everyone else," said Lysander.

Macy swept a hand. "You have a sort of private enclave back here."

"Not my choice. You, more than anyone, should know a neighborhood reflects the people who live in it. The hedges are so high because the people responsible for them feel they have more important things to do than keep them trimmed."

"You trim the low one between your house and the Pollards'?"

"Good guess. Pollard couldn't mow the lawn without losing a couple of toes. He had a crew do that. Beyond me why some people never realize that buying a house makes you responsible for it. Those two belonged in an apartment or a condo. But you didn't come here to talk about real estate."

"I've been thinking, Mr. Lysander, that sitting back here in your little enclave, you had

to have seen something and know more than you're telling us."

Lysander grunted. "No reason for me to keep quiet if I could save Pollard some grief. Easy enough for anyone to use the Pollards' back door after dark without being seen. The kids have punched holes in the hedges and trees are no barrier. Why are you still pushing? The morning paper as much as said that the D.A. intends to go for an indictment of Pollard; even though the weapon hasn't been found. Is that right?"

"It might be."

"Waste of time. Any jury will take one look at Pollard and figure he couldn't kill a fly. I'm no expert, but even I can see that you don't have enough to make one change its mind."

"I don't know, Mr. Lysander," said Ziagos. "Down at the courthouse, they say juries are good for a surprise a day. But are you sure you can't help? Even if one lets him off, it'll cost him a bundle."

"He'll still be ahead. If he'd divorced her, she'd have taken him for everything."

Macy said, "Maybe, Mr. Lysander, I should ask the neighbors if they'd seen you visiting her."

"Nothing to prevent you from doing that, I guess, but why me?"

"The medical examiner says that bruises on her wrist and hand could indicate that she was holding the knife when it entered her chest, as if someone had wrapped his hands around hers. Takes strength to do that. You've strong hands, Mr. Lysander. I also wonder what we'd find if we compared your prints to those we found in the house."

"You'd find some that match," said Lysander easily, "especially around the kitchen sink. I told you that Pollard wasn't very handy. He called me over there a month ago because the garbage disposer was giving him trouble."

He'd flicked the switch for the garbage disposer and listened to the hum for a moment. "Still operating," he said. "I do good work."

She leaned against the counter, arms folded.

"In more ways than one. You surprised me, old man. Didn't think you'd last this long."

"None of us ever stops learning."

"That's true. Like maybe you thought the last two months were a freebee. They weren't. Time to pay for the good times you've had."

"I don't remember its being one-sided."

"No law against enjoying

your work. How does ten thousand sound?"

He chuckled. "Lady, no one is *that* good. For that kind of money, I could take a long cruise, sleep with a half dozen women, and have enough left over for a trip to Vegas. You're being ridiculous."

"Not really. There are two ways this can go. I can let you walk out, rough myself up a little, call the cops, and tell them you raped me, which will give you a hatful of trouble." She reached behind her and pulled the knife from the block on the counter. "Or I can use this on you and tell them I was defending myself."

She was, he thought, a good four steps beyond being normally crazy.

"I'm supposed to stand here and allow you to do that?"

"You don't get it, do you? If you put up a fight, you make my case. Those rumors about how your wife died will be a big help."

He looked down at the knife. "Unless you're dead."

"Don't get brave. No matter what happens, you pay and I don't. You're not stupid, old man, so why not give me the ten grand and avoid all the trouble?"

Her eyes gleamed and she was half smiling.

Scary.

No wonder Pollard had run.

She'd take the money, sure, but she was hoping for an excuse to use the knife. He'd seen the same look in the eyes of the man with the shotgun who'd held up the bank where he'd been making a deposit many years ago. Once you saw it you never forgot it or doubted what it meant.

He'd always thought the man in the bank had been Death personified in jeans, a jacket, and a Halloween mask that revealed only his eyes, but this time Death had appeared in flowing dark hair and a filmy nightgown.

Hell, he'd put her down as just another greedy, grasping, cruel human being—hardly an endangered species—but she was far beyond that.

Obviously, the other men had paid; some in anger, but all in fear if they'd seen what he saw, because the odds were all on her side. Impossible to convince anyone she was a menace unless they all got together, which was as likely as Pollard's suddenly becoming a star athlete. Not one would stick his neck out to support another when doing so would not only brand him as a fool but cost him far more than money.

Ten thousand dollars? He and Patti had lived on not much more than toast and pea-

nut butter during some months when he'd started so that they could meet the payments on that first truck. The money was as much hers as his. Good woman, Patti. Hardly a day went by without something reminding him how much he missed her. He could feel the weight of her ghost, as though he'd been unfaithful.

"Any man can diddle around, Lysander, but one way or another, a price has to be paid."

Not with her money. The other men had a great deal to lose. Did he? Not really. This woman could add nothing to the burden he was already carrying.

He smiled at her. "Go to hell."

In the tick of a clock, the space of a heartbeat that seemed frozen, her eyes told him what she'd do before her brain sent the message to her hand and the blade flashed toward him.

He caught her hand and wrist in both of his and turned the knife away. Pulled off balance, she stumbled into it, the knife entering her chest just below the low-cut neckline of the filmy nightgown.

Her head went back. The deep, sensual eyes went wide. She gave one startled half squawk half scream and slowly sank to the floor.

After a moment of panic, he felt a dull regret. Not what he wanted. Something he would have avoided if he could, but he'd always reacted faster than he could think. He'd learned long ago he had quick reflexes but a slow, methodical brain.

The brain plodded along, considering courses and consequences.

Would the world be a better place if he turned himself in? He couldn't see how.

It had, after all, been something of an accident she'd brought on herself, and if it hadn't happened with him, it would have happened with someone else. Eventually she'd have threatened the wrong man.

Not much danger for him. He was sure no one was aware of his visits. But Pollard would find her when he came home and being Pollard, who couldn't grasp anything that couldn't be measured in nanoseconds, microamps, and microvolts, just might do something stupid enough to get himself into a mess he couldn't get out of.

He took the knife, went out to the Japanese maple, reached high in the darkness, found the thick limb he wanted, and drove the knife into the narrow V between the limb and the trunk. Lying close, it would be concealed from ground level.

Anyone looking for the weapon would be looking down. No one would lift his head as he passed under the tree, and the thick red leaves would mask it from any other perspective.

Long after the search was over, time and the wind and rain had brought it down and the falling leaves had covered it.

Macy turned slowly, scanning the yards. "Dunno if it will help Pollard or hurt him, but I wish we could find that damned knife. I have the feeling that it's still here somewhere."

"Only one place we haven't looked." Ziagos clapped Ly-sander on the shoulder. "How about us searching your house?"

"I don't mind, but I'm old fashioned enough to stand on my rights. You're welcome to come in, sit down, have a cup of coffee or a drink, but to throw your official weight around, you'll need a warrant."

Macy folded his arms and looked at him closely. "Uh-huh. Didn't consider that maybe if you didn't use the knife yourself, maybe you found it and tucked it away to help Pollard. Maybe we'd just better take a good look in there. You stay with him, Ziagos, while I go see a judge."

It was growing dark rapidly,

the way it does in the fall. Gloom one moment and blackness the next.

Lysander gently kicked a bag. "Since you're going out to the street anyway, want to give this potential criminal and your partner a hand getting these out to the curb? The pickup trucks come early in the morning."

Macy shrugged. "Why not? The law says that until you're convicted you're considered an honest, taxpaying citizen."

They each grasped two of the tightly packed bags and dragged them toward the street, Macy leading the way, the smooth dark green plastic whispering over the grass.

Lysander smiled.

Until—

In the gloom, Macy veered too close to the damaged fence around Patti's unplanted vegetable plot. The bag in his left

hand caught on a projecting piece of stiff wire from the damaged fence that Lysander hadn't bent quite far enough out of the way. Annoyed with himself, Macy cursed softly and pulled hard and impatiently.

Far stronger than the thin plastic, the sharp wire tore a gash the length of the bag—compressed leaves springing through the opening and bringing with them a flash of silver.

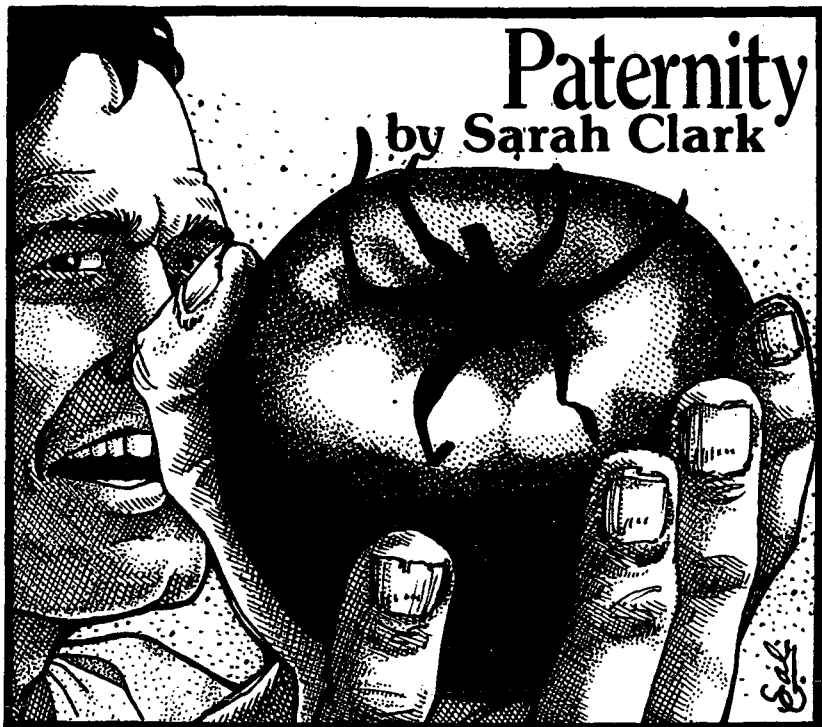
Out of the darkness, not of the coming night but of his soul, Patti's sharp voice struck deep into Lysander's heart: *For heaven's sake, it's fine to be organized but be a little flexible! Some little job will always come along that should take priority!*

Like removing that fence two months ago.

Or tacking down that loose seam in the rug that had caused her to trip and plunge headlong down the stairs.

Paternity

by Sarah Clark



“I’m pregnant.”

Lieutenant Shultzy Winchell was hardly surprised. She’d have guessed ten months.

“The baby’s due in two weeks. That’s why you have to find him.”

Mandy Johnson folded her hands across her huge belly, tapping her stiletto-sharp, vermillion nails authoritatively. She was a woman in her early thirties, hair dyed a brassy red, curled and frizzed, three loops

of gold earrings in each ear. Despite the heat and her condition, she wore tight black capris and high heels that would defy the equilibrium of an anorexic. Her only acknowledgment of her approaching maternity was a red silk smock with a plunging V-neck trimmed with black lace. The neckline left little of Mandy’s charms to the imagination.

Shultzy nodded but did not speak. Her violet eyes were trying not to pop out from behind

her tinted sunglasses. It wasn't that Shultz in her years on the force hadn't seen a lot of women who looked like Mandy Johnson. During a rather unpleasant tour of duty in Boston's Combat Zone, she'd arrested them on a nightly basis, but even the greediest hookers had switched to Nikes and sweatsuits when pregnancy was this blatant. Mrs. Johnson, however, was obviously not giving in an inch to nature.

"You can find him, can't you?" Mandy Johnson asked petulantly. Shultz marveled at the glossy sheen of her lips, the perfection of their full sensuous poutiness emphasized by the deeper crimson outline of the edges. Shultz didn't really understand why women outlined their lips; it always reminded her of coloring books, but she had to admit that Mandy Johnson was an artiste, the line was crisp and smooth.

"How long has he been missing?" Shultz took out her notepad. After all, Shultz told herself, maybe I'm envious. Forty years old, ten pounds overweight, makeup consisting of one layer of el cheapo liquid blush fortified with sunscreen to protect the aging paleface from skin cancer, I'm hardly competition for Mrs. Sex Kitten here. She failed to include in this list her natural blonde hair

and the violet eyes. Shultz preferred to think of herself as a rather plain but sturdy middle-aged cop, and whenever possible kept the eyes safely behind shades and the hair cropped so short that the inelegance of the cut would offset the beauty of its color. She chose to ignore the fact that she was a woman, except on those rare occasions when a semblance of sexuality was necessary to her duties as a police officer. There were those among her family and friends who berated her, albeit affectionately, for this shrinking from what they called a "healthy, normal lifestyle," but she was unmoved by their protests. Her husband had died in Vietnam. He was not replaceable. End of discussion. Shultz didn't see what all the fuss was about. She considered herself lucky; however brief, her marriage had been passionate and loving. After twenty years on the Boston police force, Shultz knew how rare such marriages were. If she wanted any further proof of the tawdriness of the conjugal state, she reminded herself now, she need look no further than Mandy Johnson.

"He's been gone three months." The flawless lips did not tremble nor the sultry voice quiver.

Shultz frowned: "And you

waited until now to file a missing persons report?"

"I thought he'd be back."

"I see. Pardon the question, Mrs. Johnson, but would you say your husband is missing or that he left?"

"What difference does it make? He's gone. I want him back, and it's your job to find him." Mandy Johnson stared belligerently at the police detective and thumped her palm on her handbag for emphasis. The sound of the slap of her hand on the leather reminded Mandy of the bag's contents. She rummaged through it, heaving a satisfied sigh as she found what she was looking for. Shultzzy was not surprised when this proved to be not a picture of Bill Johnson but a pack of cigarettes.

Shultzzy coughed and tapped the No Smoking sign on her desk. Mandy Johnson scowled. "I'm nervous," she complained.

"I'm sure you are." Shultzzy refrained from giving Mandy the lecture on the effect of maternal smoking on the fetus. She figured Mandy had already heard and ignored it.

"Gawd, pretty soon you'll be arresting people for smoking, I suppose." Mandy rattled the pack of cigarettes irritably.

Shultzzy was beginning to understand why Bill Johnson might have left his wife. Liking

people, however, was not a prerequisite for helping them.

"When did you last see him?"

"May third. We had a fight, and I told him to shove off. When he didn't come back after a week, I got worried and called his job. They said he'd resigned. Sent them a letter."

"You waited a week to call?"

Mandy tapped the cigarette pack on the arm of the chair.

"Well, you see, Billy had this habit of going on benders. When he didn't come home after the fight, that's what I assumed. He usually holed up somewhere and called in sick to work. But when he didn't come home on Friday, I got worried. He got paid on Fridays, so he usually sobered up enough to go back to work by then."

"I see, but once you found out he hadn't returned to work, why didn't you come to the police?"

"I figured he'd run off. He wasn't too happy about becoming a father. So I said to myself good riddance. I can take care of myself. I wasn't really that upset about losing Bill. He was a good provider, but a drunk is not my idea of a great husband. You got any smoking rooms here?" Mandy waved her cigarettes at Shultzzy.

Shultzzy shook her head. "You checked with his friends and family?"

"Friends," Mandy snorted. "That's a laugh. I was the closest to a friend Bill had. He didn't have a family."

"Everyone has a family, Mrs. Johnson."

"Not Bill. His mother ran off when he was four, and his father didn't stick around long enough to get his name on the birth certificate. Bill was sent from one foster home to another. He lied about his age and joined the Air Force when he was sixteen. That's where he learned auto mechanics and drinking. I met him a little over a year ago. He'd been on the wagon a few weeks. Stayed on it just long enough for us to get married. What a sap I was." Mandy rolled her eyes in disgust.

She tapped a cigarette out of the pack.

"I can hold it, right?" She rolled the cigarette in her fingers. "No law against that?" she asked sarcastically.

"No. What was the fight about, Mrs. Johnson?"

Mandy lifted the cigarette to her lips and exhaled. "As I mentioned, Bill wasn't happy about the baby. Wanted me to have an abortion. When I said no, he tried to do the job himself. Fortunately for me, the super happened to be coming up to repair our toilet and he got Bill off me and kicked him out.

Told him to come back when he was sober."

"He'd been drinking already?"

"Oh, yeah. Cashed his check and bought his booze. Anyways, you can see why I wasn't exactly in a hurry for him to come home."

"Then why are you looking for him now?"

"Because of the insurance."

"Insurance?"

"Yeah, medical insurance. Bill must have sobered up sometime over the weekend and felt guilty. He used to send me flowers, get real romantic after a bender. This time I guess he didn't feel romantic enough to come back, but he did pay up his insurance premiums at work for six months. I got to admit it was nice of him, seeing how he felt about the baby." Mandy took another imaginary puff. "But yesterday I get this letter from the insurance company telling me they need Bill's address before they'll pay my bills. Have you ever heard anything so stupid? I told them I got no idea where he is and they say I better file a missing persons report or they won't pay, period. So here I am, lieutenant. And now I guess it's up to you." Mandy flipped her unlit cigarette to her lips and then grimaced. "Think I could leave you to it? I don't get a drag

soon, I'm gonna have a nicotine fit."

Shultz took her revenge.

"I'm afraid you've got some forms to fill out, Mrs. Johnson. If you'd like to have a smoke, you can go outside first."

"Are you kidding? It's ninety-five degrees out there. I don't know if you noticed, but I'm carrying around a little excess baggage here. One cigarette isn't gonna kill you, is it?"

"Rules are rules," Shultz smiled. "After all, we can't have the police breaking the law, can we? I'll leave you in my partner's capable hands. You wouldn't by chance like a glass of milk? I could send out for some." Shultz pressed the intercom.

"Milk?" Mandy crushed her cigarette between her fingers. She glared at Shultz. Her look changed as Bill Meese appeared in the doorway. Shultz could almost see the thought flashing across Mandy Johnson's mind—a man at last, now I'll have my cigarette.

Shultz chuckled softly as she walked down the hall. Since Bill Meese had given up smoking, he'd become a fanatic about the evils of that particular habit. Mandy could flutter her eyelashes until they fell out one by one, Bill would not budge.

*

“Nothing from the computers,” Bill frowned into his iced tea later that afternoon. “Guess we’ll have to hit the streets.”

“Oh joy, oh rapture unforeseen. Is the air conditioner still on the blink?” Shultz groaned.

“Yup. I say we make Friendly Chevrolet our first stop,” Bill grinned.

“Meese, you are a sly one.”

“Hey, I know how grumpy you get when the thermometer goes over seventy-one.”

“And you, Bill, are such a sweetheart? Is this the same guy who hid out in the morgue the last time the air conditioning broke?”

“We were investigating a homicide, Shultz. I did have to study the body.”

“Sure, you and Murphy were playing pinochle when I found you.” Shultz eased herself into the passenger side of their very sticky cruiser. “Missing persons! What a drag, as Mrs. Johnson would say. I’ll be glad when vacation season is over and we can get back to homicide. You think we can find Johnson? He could be anywhere by now. In my opinion, he figured out Junior wasn’t his and got out of that very unpleasant lady’s life before he was stuck for good.”

"Doesn't sound like he was any too charming himself. What makes you think the baby wasn't his?"

"The way Mrs. Johnson looks at every male that crosses her line of vision. I admit she can't do much in the way of action right now, but tell me her voice didn't get husky when she asked you if she could light up. She did ask, didn't she?"

"Oh, yeah."

"And was she seductive about it?"

"Shame on you, Shultzzy, you sound like a sexist."

"Was she?"

"Oh, officer, I know you wouldn't deny a lady her one vice?" Meese attempted Marilyn Monroe but sounded like Groucho.

"Her one vice!" Shultzzy har-rumphed.

It was cool inside the office of Friendly Chevrolet. Business had slowed to inanimate, most of the Boston populace having emigrated to the beach.

"Sure, I'll have Mike look at your cruiser," Phil Parsons, the manager, smiled across his desk at the two police officers. "I can probably give you more help there than on Bill Johnson. All I know is, he didn't show up for work, and a few days later I get that letter from him."

Parsons nodded his head at the letter Shultzzy was reading. "Dear Mr. Parsons: I am resigning my job. Here's a check to cover the insurance on my wife for the next six months, like it says in the employee manual. Yours truly, Bill Johnson." Not a very good speller, our Bill, Shultzzy noted.

"And he was correct about the insurance?" she asked.

"Yeah, we let people pay for it for up to six months. Usually they get another job before that."

"He didn't mention keeping any for himself, though?"

"No. I guess he felt he owed it to his wife, her being pregnant and all, but if he was running out on her, he wouldn't want to leave an address, now would he?" Phil Parsons rolled his ballpoint pen between his fingers and raised an eyebrow.

"You think he was running out on her?"

"I'm no detective, but why else would he leave town? If the cops . . . police," Phil corrected himself, "were after him, you'd know, wouldn't you?"

"He had no record," Shultzzy agreed.

"So. *Cherchez la femme*, right?" Parsons smirked.

"Mandy Johnson said he was a drinker. That he went on bouts and would miss a week of work at a time."

Parsons frowned and tapped his pen on the blotter.

"If he did, I never heard about it." Parsons flipped open the manila folder on his desk. "Sick days," Parsons' frown lengthened. "He had a week out sick in December, February, and April. Reason for absence—asthma." Parsons pressed the intercom button for his secretary.

Susan Lewis was a pretty, pudgy woman in her early fifties, the kind who always has a jar of candy on her desk and a tin of brownies to leave at the coffee urn. In fact, she had offered Meese and Shultzzy a choice of peppermints as they'd sat waiting for Parsons earlier. Her face puckered up in disbelief as Parsons accused Bill Johnson of lying about his asthma attacks.

"My goodness, no. Bill certainly did have asthma. I've seen him come in from the shop wheezing. All those fumes couldn't have been good for him. I used to tell him he should find another line of work. Oh, dear, I hope he didn't leave because of—" a stricken look crossed Mrs. Lewis's face.

"Don't be silly, Suse, the man ran away from his wife. He didn't quit because of you. How do you know he wasn't faking the wheezing?"

"I know, Phil." Susan eye-

balled her boss with a firmness that made Shultzzy realize that soft as she might appear, Susan Lewis took no flak. "Besides, there were all those prescriptions for Prednisone and Theodor. Asthma medication. It's right there in the file. If Bill was a drinker, he never drank here. I would have heard about it," she finished pointedly.

Phil Parsons sighed. "She's right. Suse knows everything that goes on, and she tells me what she thinks I should know."

"And if a man were drinking on the job or taking a week off for bouts, I'd tell you, Phil," Susan Lewis stated with quiet dignity.

"She would." Phil shrugged his shoulders at the police officers. "Of course, you didn't follow him home, Suse. Drinkers can be pretty smart at hiding it."

"You'll never convince me Bill was a drinker." Susan Lewis shook her head vehemently.

"Why not, Mrs. Lewis?" Shultzzy asked.

"He liked his food too much, for one thing. Said he'd had to watch his weight for twenty years in the Air Force and he didn't care if he gained a few pounds. And he did gain about fifteen pounds. Oh, I don't know, maybe I am being silly.

He was just such a sweet man, and he was looking forward to being a father so much. It didn't make sense to me when he ran off like that." Susan Lewis's brown eyes teared up. "Such a shame, he'll never see that baby now."

Shultz and Meese stared at each other and then back at Susan Lewis.

"You're telling us that Bill Johnson wanted the baby?" Shultz asked.

"Oh, he was just thrilled. Why, what did she tell you?" Susan's eyes narrowed.

"That he wanted her to have an abortion."

"What! She was the one who wanted an abortion, but her doctor told her that she'd had so many, another one would be dangerous. Bill was overjoyed because, believe me, no way would she have had that baby otherwise. She was not interested in anything but spending his money as fast as he made it and going out till all hours of the night. Wore him out, she did, it's no wonder he had asthma attacks. But he didn't mind. She's young, he said, she still likes to party. The man would do anything for her. That's why it didn't make sense to me when he disappeared, but I thought maybe he just wised up all of a sudden—" Susan stopped.

"What do you mean by wised up?" Shultz asked.

Susan reddened. "It's just a guess, but I always wondered if the baby was really his. Maybe he found out it wasn't. That would have made him leave."

Shultz cast an I-told-you-so look at Bill Meese, who was not impressed. Knowing Johnson had vamoosed under his own volition wasn't going to make it any easier to find him, Bill pointed out as they followed Susan Lewis to the Service Department.

"I need a couple more hours," Mike Connolly said, wiping his sweaty face with a handkerchief that might have been clean that morning but certainly would never be again. "Think you could leave it here this afternoon?"

"It's against regulations," Shultz groaned. "Don't we have to get a purchase order or something?"

"Forget that, it'll be December if we go that route," Bill muttered. "How about we split the bill? How much you think it'll be?"

"Geeze, the city really is broke." Connolly smeared the grease across his face in another futile attempt at cleanliness. He was a wiry man in his late thirties, and underneath all the grease, not bad looking.

"Maybe Phil will give you a discount. We get a city contract all of a sudden?"

"No, we're here on business, and we were hoping it would be a simple repair," Shultz cast a doleful glance at the car. She slipped her tinted sunglasses off her nose and beamed her luscious violet eyes in Connolly's direction.

"It's just so hot out today, isn't it?" Shultz sighed, her vivid orbs bent on the mechanic.

Meese stared, fascinated. Connolly's head was weaving like a snake under the spell of a snake charmer.

"It is a pretty simple repair," Connolly murmured. "Why don't I just fit it in between jobs. Do it at cost. Can't have Boston's Finest melting now, can we?" He grinned idiotically at Shultz.

"We'd really appreciate it, Mr. Connolly." Shultz's voice was a soft, stroking caress of gratitude.

Meese's mouth dropped open. He had seen Shultz do this before on even more desperate occasions, but it never failed to astonish him. Ninety percent of the time it was easy to forget Shultz was a woman. The other ten percent was what unsettled Meese. It wasn't that he was against Shultz's resuming her sex life sometime, but

if forced to say when, Meese would have opted for that date far in the future when one or the other of them was retired.

Shultz replaced her glasses on her nose. Safe behind the smoky tint of her lenses, her eyes glittered at Connolly devoid of enchantment.

"How well did you know Bill Johnson?" Shultz inquired in the flat tones of Sergeant Joe Friday.

"I know what you're thinking, Bill, but—"

"I'm not thinking anything but how cool I am." Meese shifted the loaner Celebrity into gear.

"You're thinking I'm a hypocrite, but there's a difference between being a woman who uses sex to manipulate men for her own vile purposes and a woman who uses sex to manipulate men in order to save her partner from heat prostration." Shultz pushed the air conditioner to high.

"A point well taken, and I do appreciate your efforts on my behalf. So you think Mandy Johnson manipulated her husband for vile purposes."

"What was it Connolly said? 'She had him wrapped around her little finger.'"

Connolly had indeed confirmed Susan Lewis's opinion of the Johnsons.

"She said jump, he jumped. Except when it came to money. He wasn't totally stupid. He put her on a cash allowance, no credit cards, after she rang up two thousand dollars in clothes bills one month. She was p.o.'d, but he stuck to his guns. He was saving up for a down payment on a house in the suburbs. Didn't want to raise a kid in the city."

Mike Connolly shook his head when Shultz mentioned Mrs. Johnson's disgust at her husband's drinking habits.

"Told me he was allergic to booze. Claimed he never touched the stuff. Came out drinking with me once or twice after work, but all he had was seltzer. I tell you I wouldn't believe anything that dame tells you."

The Johnsons' apartment was on Park Drive, overlooking the Fenway, in a building that had been stylish when first constructed in the thirties, gone through a tatty student stage in the sixties, and in the eighties been yuppized as far as was possible given the long term leases of some of its tenants.

Mrs. Feinstein, the Johnsons' across the hall neighbor, had lived on the first floor of 117 since 1952 when she came there as a bride. Now a widow in her sixties, she wouldn't

think of leaving her perch in what she considered Boston's best location. Despite the cockroaches and the bars she had to pull across her windows at night, the Fenway was still heaven to Mrs. Feinstein.

"Oh, I know the other apartments are much fancier now. They haven't done anything to mine in years, but I like it just the way it is," Shirley Feinstein smiled contentedly. "I wouldn't want to have my collections disturbed by painters. No matter how careful they are, things get broken."

Mrs. Feinstein's long, narrow living room was lined with glass cabinets crammed with salt and pepper shakers in every conceivable shape and size. Frog shakers, English thatched cottage shakers, Elvis Presley shakers, Eskimo shakers from Alaska, hula girl shakers from Honolulu.

"It's my pleasure," Mrs. Feinstein smiled. "They're all my friends."

Meese shifted uneasily. Make this quick, Shultzzy, his expression telegraphed. Anyone who considers salt and pepper shakers her friends was a candidate for dementia in his book.

Mrs. Feinstein moved to the bay window.

"And I've such a lovely view, don't you think? The park and

beyond there the Museum of Fine Arts and of course, down that way is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Such lovely Sunday afternoon concerts, and I can still walk to the Victory Gardens. I do it every day. One has to keep in shape." Mrs. Feinstein patted her tummy. "It's a constant fight. Now, do sit down. I suppose you'd like a contribution for something. Let me see." She reached for her handbag.

"No, Mrs. Feinstein, please, we're here on business. It's to do with Bill Johnson. He lived across the hall. He disappeared about three months ago. According to Mrs. Johnson, they had a fight on a Friday night and he left. It would have been May third." Shultzzy checked her notebook. "Do you remember anything?"

"Well, I certainly remember Mr. Johnson. Such a sweet man, carried my groceries in for me several times. Always said hello and how are you. Not like some people who think anyone over forty isn't worth talking to." Mrs. Feinstein sniffed. "That Mrs. Johnson, she never so much as nods her head at me. I wondered what had happened to him. Especially when I saw her condition. But she wouldn't answer me, even when I came right out and asked. Just pretended she

hadn't heard. Well, you can't blame a man for leaving a woman like that. But a baby, dear, I wouldn't think he'd want to leave his baby."

"Do you remember a fight three months ago?" Shultzzy asked.

"Goodness, they were always fighting, that's how I knew he had to be gone, things were so quiet. Not that he ever said much. It was her, always carrying on, ranting and raving about how he wasn't any good, and she needed money, and, well." Mrs. Feinstein blushed. "I used to turn my TV up so I wouldn't hear it all. Such language out of a woman. I couldn't understand how he could take it, but love is strange, isn't it?"

"So you don't remember anything different about the fight on May third? Mrs. Johnson said her husband was drunk and that the super had to kick him out."

"Well, I don't remember that. But she's always calling the super for one thing or another. He's in her apartment more than his own. I can't even get him to fix the leaky faucet in the kitchen, although he does give me tomatoes and zucchini from his garden. He has a Victory Garden. I suppose he's generous, so we won't complain about him. Did you say Mrs.

Johnson said her husband drank?" Mrs. Feinstein suddenly remembered Shultz's words. "Why, I can't believe that. Now, she's the drinker. I've smelled it on her breath at the mailboxes more times than I'd like to think about. And her pregnant, too. Poor little baby."

"Old biddy. 'Course she'd say Mandy drank. You should have a look in Feinstein's trash. Puts away enough of that Manischewitz to rot her guts." Peter Douglas squirted his hose with a vengeance. He zapped the tomatoes so hard the vines shook. "I suppose she told you I was down here. Well, I get a break, don't I? Weather like this you got to water every chance you get."

"She did mention how grateful she was for the vegetables you've been giving her," Shultz said diplomatically, shifting her feet uncomfortably on the hard-baked soil. Her feet were swollen, and her trousers, damp with sweat, were sticking to her legs. She squinted at Meese and was pleased to see he looked equally uncomfortable. They both watched jealously as Douglas spritzed himself. The water cascaded down his shoulders, running in rivulets down his legs. Shultz wondered just how unprofessional it would be to grab the

hose and stick her head under the cooling stream.

"Yeah, they all like my vegetables," Douglas grinned. "You guys want some? Here." He reached out to pluck a particularly luscious tomato.

"No, thanks," Shultz shook her head. There was something about Douglas that made her not want to eat anything he had touched, much less grown. Although she had to admit his garden was a real prizewinner, head and shoulders above its neighbors where the heat wave had definitely taken a toll.

"How long have you been super?" Shultz asked.

"About three years."

"So you've known the Johnsons since they moved in."

"Yeah, well, I've known Mandy." Douglas turned off the water and started coiling the hose. "Him I didn't really know. Except what she told me."

"And what did she tell you?"

"Oh, the usual. He didn't want to take her anywhere, he was cheap, he was getting a pot belly. That kind of stuff. The 'he doesn't understand me' routine. I get it a lot." Pete Douglas stretched, displaying his well-muscled body, and lowered his eyes suggestively.

"Did you take her up on it?" Shultz saw no need to be subtle with Pete Douglas.

"Once or twice. A while back. October, I think. Hey, I'm human, and the lady isn't a lady, if you know what I mean. Besides, I like older women." Pete's eyes traveled up Shultz's body from her sensible sneakers to her sunglasses, jet black in the dazzling light of the gardens.

Scumbag. Shultz pressed her glasses farther against her face, as if to keep the thought safely imprisoned in her head.

"Did her old man know about you?" Bill Meese leaped into the breach. It was hot. Shultz's temper had been known to flare in even more temperate zones when faced with macho sleazebuckets.

"Nah, that guy was dense. All he could see was how great it was she was pregnant. Hey, let me get one thing straight, I am not the father of that little bun in her oven. Believe me, I wouldn't have anything but safe sex with a slut like that."

"You think Johnson is the father?" Shultz asked.

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm not the only shoulder she cried on. There's a lot of bars in this town, and a lot of lonely guys."

"How could her husband not know?"

"Maybe he didn't want to know. Besides, she did most of her playing around in the afternoon."

"How long did you play around with her?"

"Not long. I don't like sharing the favors."

"But she did call you on the third of May when they had their big fight."

"Their *last* big fight. Yeah. I went up and broke it up."

"And he was drunk?"

"Oh, yeah, they both were. But he was more drunk. Couldn't hold it as well as she could. Well, they're like that, aren't they, alcoholics?"

"How do you know he was an alcoholic?" Shultz asked.

"I don't." Douglas shrugged. "But he was drunk that night. I'll swear to that. And he ain't been around since. Looks pretty clear to me that he run off. Not that I blame him."

"How important is it whether Bill Johnson was a drunk or not?" Bill Meese chomped on some crushed ice, trying to decide whether to order another iced tea. They were in the McDonald's a block away from Friendly Chevrolet. Mike Connolly had promised them their cruiser in half an hour.

"Probably not at all, except that it would be nice to know who's lying, if anyone. There are drunks who hide it for a long time from their employers. It's possible Mr. Johnson was a Jekyll/Hyde type. Then again,

Mrs. Johnson," Shultzzy frowned. "Not too many good words going around for that lady. All that really matters, though, is where he is, not how he is or whether this marriage can be saved." Shultzzy slurped her chocolate shake. "Ah, that was good."

"Nothing from the computer search?"

"Nope. Mary Lee did talk with a Major Hotchkiss at his last post. According to Hotchkiss, Johnson was honorably discharged after twenty years. Wanted to get married and settle down. He also said Johnson developed asthma about three years ago, that he was..." Shultzzy consulted her notepad "...a steady guy, good worker, never knew him to be drunk and disorderly."

"What about buddies?"

"Kept to himself. He'd been moved around a lot. Had friends but no one Hotchkiss could remember as being close. However, you know Mary Lee, she'll be calling up the entire Air Force to check it out," Shultzzy grinned.

"She also got us an appointment with Miss McGinnis at the Pilgrim Insurance Company. She said Miss McGinnis preferred to talk only with the officers in charge of the case. Mary Lee had the feeling Miss McGinnis was suspicious of

her." Shultzzy raised an eyebrow.

"I suppose you think I'm silly, but anyone can call on the phone and say they're the police." Sheila McGinnis straightened the collar on her business suit. It was obvious that nothing was allowed to be out of alignment long in Sheila's life. Her pencils, paper clips, and pens were perfectly lined up on the desk tray. The rose in her vase drooped not a centimeter. The letters in the out tray were stacked precisely. The in tray was empty.

"You're absolutely right," Shultzzy agreed.

"The fact is, I don't trust this Mandy Johnson. I believe she's lied to me about her husband's disappearance, and I don't put it past her to get a friend to call and try to find out what I know."

Shultzzy regarded Sheila McGinnis with increasing admiration.

"And what is it that you know?"

"I know that Bill Johnson did not write that letter of resignation," Sheila said triumphantly. "I was out on maternity leave when it came, or I would have started an investigation immediately. I just got back last week, and when I saw that letter with all those mis-

spellings, I knew something was wrong."

"I don't understand. What makes you think Mr. Johnson could spell?"

"We had some correspondence." Sheila McGinnis reached into her file drawer and pulled out a manila folder. "When he was out with his first attack of asthma, the hospital made a mistake in his bill, which he found and reported to us. I wish we had more clients like Mr. Johnson. He saved us about five hundred dollars. I wrote and thanked him and mentioned that I'd be going on maternity leave and gave him the name of the person who would be responsible in my absence. He then wrote me a nice note wishing me well." Sheila McGinnis opened the file and carefully placed two letters on the desk for the detectives' perusal. Her tapered, perfectly manicured finger pointed to the words "insurance," "employee," and "truly."

"Very interesting. You think perhaps Mrs. Johnson wrote the letter?" Shultzzy asked.

"Yes, I do, and I think she forged his signature on the check. I suppose it must seem cruel to point out fraud in a case like this. I realize the woman is pregnant, and he did leave her. However, maternity benefits are very costly. If she'd

come in and tell the truth, I would be willing to present the case to my supervisors. They might agree to let her have the benefits. I doubt that the company would seriously pursue the fraud charges, given her condition; they certainly wouldn't condone it, however, and it's my duty to report it." Sheila McGinnis smoothed out a crease in one of the letters prior to replacing it in its folder. "If she finds Mr. Johnson, it's still fraud, but of course, he would then be responsible for child support."

"Could I see that note again?" Shultzzy read from Bill Johnson's second letter. "I am happy to hear you will soon be a mother. I am sure you must be very happy. It doesn't sound like a guy who would desert his own baby, does it?"

"No." Sheila McGinnis said. "That's another reason I wanted to find him. I don't want to seem paranoid, but I see no reason why Pilgrim should subsidize the birth of a baby that was not conceived by the insured."

“C live Landau called. He's the neighbor you missed. He suggested you come down to the theater to interview him. He won't be off work until the

wee small hours of the morning. Apparently theater people have even lousier hours than cops," Mary Lee Kingsley smiled up at Shultz. "And I found a friend of Bill Johnson's."

"I'm going to miss you when you get your promotion," Shultz sighed. "Who did you find?"

"Master Sergeant Frank Arvilla and his wife, Staff Sergeant Marie, stationed in Brunswick, Maine, until Saddam Hussein got so nasty. How many kinds of sergeants do they have in the Air Force? Does she outrank him, I wonder?" Mary Lee mused. "Anyway, they just got back from the Gulf two weeks ago and are very concerned about the news that Bill Johnson's AWOL. They weren't totally surprised, though, seems Bill had been writing them and his letters stopped in May. It was particularly odd because the Arvillas were in different places and he wrote to them both, so something should have gotten through."

"Maybe he didn't want to admit he was running away," Meese suggested. "Some guys are like that."

"Did he say anything about his home life in his letters?" Shultz asked.

"Told them Mandy was preg-

nant and he was thrilled. Said he'd put her on a budget. She didn't like it, he said, but he didn't want to deplete his savings any further with a baby coming. No mention of a separation, but—" Mary Lee's black eyes glimmered. "They did ask if we'd like them to open the safe deposit box."

"Safe deposit box?"

"Yes." A smile lit up Mary Lee's face. She was a pretty woman even without the smile; with it she was gorgeous. Shultz sometimes wondered if criminals didn't surrender to Mary Lee just to have the chance to be interrogated by her. Twenty-four years old, not an ounce of extra flesh anywhere on her lithe body, Mary Lee had a close-cropped Afro that showed off the sculptured lines of a face that could have graced the covers of *Vogue* or *Ebony*. For Shultz, however, her most stunning attribute was her ability to hit pay dirt on even the most routine interviews. She also enjoyed keeping the choicest tidbits until last.

"Okay. Give, Mary Lee, what's in the box?" Shultz lowered her sunglasses, her ultraviolets snapping impatiently.

"A certificate of deposit in Bill Johnson's name for twenty-five thousand dollars which

came due on May eighth. He took it out in a Brunswick bank and left it in the safety deposit box there. Now, doesn't it seem strange that Bill Johnson didn't drive up to Brunswick and cash in that certificate? He supposedly left town on May third or fourth."

"Very. Why'd he have it there in the first place? Keep it out of Mandy's hands?"

"Right. The only other people who had a key to the box were the Arvillas and, when they left for the Gulf in February, Frank's mother. But—" Mary Lee's smile grew even wider. "—Mandy must have gotten a letter from the bank saying the certificate was due because she called up Mrs. Arvilla on May eighth and asked if she could borrow the key to the box. Said Bill wanted her to pick up the C.D."

"But Bill had left. How did she know he wouldn't go get it himself?" Shultzzy's eyes narrowed.

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Mandy claimed Bill had lost the key and didn't want to take off from work to get another one. Mrs. Arvilla, however, was not impressed. Apparently she gave Mandy her opinion of wives who try to empty their husband's bank accounts. Mandy hung up on her. However, it occurred to me that

Mandy wouldn't give up so easily. I decided to call the bank, see if anyone had tried to cash in the C.D." Mary Lee paused for dramatic effect.

"Why do we bother to trot around Boston in the middle of a heat wave when Ms. Kingsley here can break a case wide open over the phone?" Shultzzy groaned in Meese's direction. "And what happened at the bank?"

"I had no luck with the Brunswick branch, but in Portland, the bank manager remembered that Bill Johnson did show up."

"Johnson? He took out his twenty-five thousand? We won't find him for awhile then. Where would you go if you had twenty-five thou in cash? I'd be on the next plane for Paris." A vision of herself strolling down the Champs Elysées flashed temptingly through Shultzzy's mind.

"Jamaica," Mary Lee responded dreamily.

"Alaska," Meese grunted. "A cabin in the woods. Just Claire and me. No one else within twenty miles."

"So, did Johnson leave a forwarding address?" Shultzzy broke out of her reverie of croissants and cafe au lait.

"It wasn't Johnson, Shultzzy." Mary Lee clicked back into action.

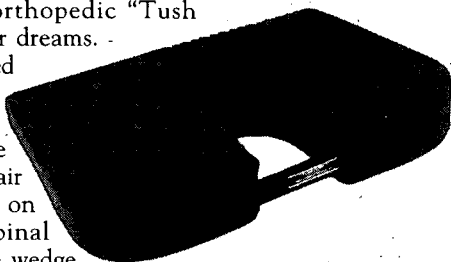
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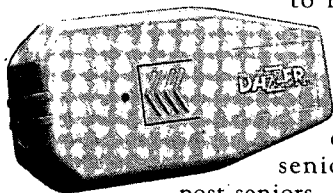
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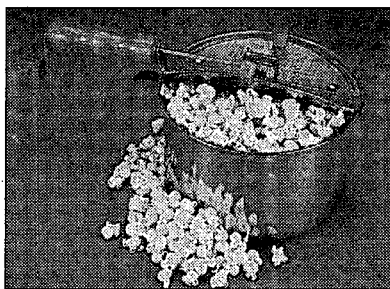
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"Why am I not terribly surprised?" Shultz commented. "Any idea who it was?"

"No, but Mandy Johnson was with him. Caused quite a stink when the clerk refused to cash in the C.D. because Mr. Johnson didn't have the certificate in hand. Mandy gave them the story about losing the key to the safe deposit box and told them to call Brunswick and have someone open the box. Accused them of incompetence when the bank manager informed her that was against regulations."

"Any description of Mr. Johnson?"

"Not much to go on. Late twenties, early thirties, not bad looking. Dressed in a suit and tie. Dark hair."

"Real specific." Shultz winced. "Did anyone sound like they might recognize him?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Mary Lee shrugged elegantly and then smiled. "However, he'll probably be back."

"Mary Lee, you've been holding out on us again? Tell."

"The bank manager told them the bank would cash the C.D. if Johnson came back with photo identification. All he had was the letter from the bank saying the C.D. should be redeemed and his Social Security card. Said he'd lost his driver's license and couldn't get a new

one until after the turnover date on the C.D. The bank said, sorry, all they could do was renew the C.D. for three months, which they did; the new due date is August eighth. I have a feeling this time Mr. Johnson will have a photo I.D. with him. What do you think?"

"I think we should make a trip to Maine on the eighth. Call the manager, Mary Lee, and suggest you be made a C.D. clerk for the day."

Mary Lee beamed. Good as she was on the phone, she much preferred to be where the action was.

"S it down, I'll be with you in a minute." Clive Landau pulled a pin out of his mouth and stuck it in the tuck he was making in a heavily brocaded bodice, encasing an even heavier actress.

"Gawd, Clive, how tight does this have to be?" his victim moaned.

"As tight as an eighteenth century corset, my dear, which you'll have on, by the way. Jonathan wants authenticity, remember?" Clive divested his mouth of the last pin. "And don't complain, dearest one; you don't have to wear your little fingers to the bone hand-sewing this damnable brocade.

Broke me sewing machine, it did," Clive switched into Cockney and winked at the detectives.

"A corset! I suppose I'll just have to diet." The bulky actress squeezed her waist with her hands and sighed deeply as she watched her stomach protrude. "It's hopeless."

Shultzzy surreptitiously patted her own stomach, which was beginning to burgeon due to her recent mania for chocolate shakes. Iced tea next time, she commanded herself.

"Now, love, not to worry. We'll push it all up here," Clive's hands fluttered over the actress's already ample breasts. "Cleavage, dear. No one minds a little excess weight when it's cleavage. Now run along, I have to talk to these folks in private." Clive lowered his voice to a resounding stage whisper. "Man gone missing in my building. Very suspicious."

The actress eyed Shultzzy and Meese with interest.

"No kidding. Have I read about it in the papers?"

"Nothing that special," Shultzzy said.

"Beat it, Beatrice," Clive shooed her out the door with a flamboyant flourish. "Now, officers, I'm all yours." He wriggled his shoulders coquettishly. "What can I tell you about Madame Johnson?"

"How well do you know her?" Shultzzy asked.

"About as well as I want to, which isn't much, believe me. But I do have ears, now don't I? And Mrs. Johnson on the rampage is like a bull elephant in heat. Loud, if you get my meaning. *Quelle horreur*, that woman. No wonder the poor man fled. Why did he stay so long is my question," Clive flicked a thread off his shirt.

"What do you mean by on the rampage?"

"A veritable virago, always screaming at hubby. Well, fortunately, I am not home a lot, but when I was, I certainly got an earful. Didn't like him gaining weight, wanted money out of him, didn't want little bambino. That sort of thing," Clive fluttered his fingers in the air. "Of course, she hates me, so I don't know how good my testimony is, but if you want my opinion, I think she did him in."

"Are you serious, Mr. Landau? That's quite an accusation."

"Well, maybe I go too far," Clive admitted grudgingly and then pursed his lips. "But it wouldn't surprise me."

"Why not?"

"If looks could kill, she'd have had me in my coffin long since."

"How come?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm not ex-

actly Mr. Hercules the Super Stud, now am I? Madame likes her men to be real men. Somehow she doesn't see me that way. Doesn't bother me, except some people are not subtle about their little prejudices."

Somehow it didn't surprise Shultz that Mandy Johnson was homophobic.

"What about her husband? Did he feel the same way?"

"Don't think so. Didn't see much of him, but he always said hello. Didn't throw any daggerlike glances in my direction like the missus."

"And the super? What do you think was going on between him and Mrs. Johnson?"

"Everything. And *was* is not the tense I'd use."

"Mr. Douglas claims his personal relationship with Mrs. Johnson ended last October. He said he didn't like the competition. She had too many other lovers."

"Did he now? I wouldn't fancy Mr. Macho would be worried about competition. I can't say I noticed any, either."

"He said that she had lovers in the afternoon. Are you home in the afternoon?"

"Not much, although I was in the fall. Let's see, it was . . . November, that's right. I was between shows, as we say in the theater—unemployed to ordinary mortals. Anyway, I didn't

notice any stampede to Mrs. Johnson's door, and that was long before she was preggers. I do remember trying to get Pete Douglas to replace a broken pane in my window and finally grappling with him as he emerged from Mrs. Johnson's web. It was around Thanksgiving."

"Of course, he might have been repairing something in her apartment, I suppose?"

"I suppose. Except it wasn't me that unzipped his fly. Not my type, at all."

"Were you home on the evening of Friday, May third? The night Douglas had to break up a fight between the Johnsons?"

"No. How I kick myself for missing that one! May third. Oh yes, we opened that night, and there was a party afterwards. Of course, now I remember, my sweets—" Clive forgot in his ecstasy that the police are not used to endearments—"that was the night Mrs. Johnson called me a queer. Now really, not only is the woman a homophobe, she's hopelessly out of date. I was not amused, however."

"You said you were out all night."

"Not all night, until three. I came home with a friend. A weightlifter, I might add. And just as we were making our way quietly down the hallway,

who should pop out of Number 3 but Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Douglas. Taking out the garbage they were, at three o'clock in the morning. I'd had just enough to drink to make me try one more attempt at being a good neighbor, so I offered the services of myself and friend. And what does that bitch say but 'Stay away from us, you queers.' Well, enough said. Andy was quite willing to unleash his powerful biceps on Douglas, but I saw no need to ruin my evening any further."

"They were taking out the garbage at three A.M.? Wasn't that a little strange?"

"My thoughts exactly until I heard the husband had left. Then, of course, I got the picture. She was throwing out all his stuff. I'm surprised she didn't just heave it out the window. She's the type to enjoy watching a man grovel around in the bushes, looking for his jockey shorts."

"Mary Lee, you look superb," Shultzzy chortled.

"You think so?" Mary Lee took another look at herself in the mirror of the ladies' room. "You don't think it's too far out for a bank in Maine?" She tossed her head, and the corn rows swished across her shoulders.

"This is Portland, not Fort

Kent," Shultzzy said. "I guarantee that Mandy Johnson will not recognize you."

"Maybe, but I'm keeping the glasses on, too." Mary Lee stuck the heavy, red-framed specs on her nose.

"Perfect. I tell you, the video of this transaction is going to be very popular in the office," Shultzzy grinned.

"Blackmail, Shultzzy, will get you nowhere." Mary Lee twitched a corn row into place and grinned back. Undercover was so much fun.

“You think they'll come today?" Meese asked as he and Shultzzy

settled down in the bank manager's office, tape recorders and hidden cameras at the ready.

"Oh, yeah. The C.D.'s due today and the baby yesterday from the looks of it. Mandy won't want to waste any time."

"Hard to believe she's going to be a mother," Meese commented. "Who do you think the father is?"

"I have no idea. And I don't think it matters much any more. That kid's chance of having at least one good parent disappeared with Bill Johnson." Shultzzy's lips tightened. The thought of Mandy Johnson as a mother bothered her more than she cared to admit. Babies de-

served to be wanted, in Shultz's opinion.

"What do you mean we have to wait until tomorrow for the money?" Mandy protested. "My husband has identification. We got your letter. What is this?"

Mary Lee Kingsley adjusted her glasses and peered once again at the fake driver's license. Pete Douglas's picture smiled up at her surrounded by Bill Johnson's vital statistics. She refrained from saying how young Mr. Douglas looked for his age.

"It's just routine in a case where the certificate itself has been lost. FDIC regulations. I know it's an inconvenience for you, but my hands are tied. It's only a twenty-four-hour waiting period, though. You'll have the money tomorrow," Mary Lee smiled cheerily.

"Great! And I could be popping my cork by then," Mandy complained.

"Hey, babe, it's okay. I can come get it, right?" Pete Douglas asked.

"Certainly, Mr. Johnson, the certificate is in your name, not your wife's."

"See, nothing to worry about," Pete grinned. Mandy did not return his grin.

"I wonder just how far Mrs. Johnson trusts Pete Douglas,"

Shultz said as she and Meese observed the couple making their way to their car. "Wish we had a bug in the parking lot."

"I have a feeling it'd be X-rated," Meese said. "My question is, are we going to have to settle for fraud?"

"Not if our little night gardening crew comes up with Mr. Johnson." Shultz grimaced. "I'm glad I didn't take those tomatoes Douglas offered me."

"Come on, Shultz, they could have thrown him in the river with some cinder blocks."

"If they did, that's our tough luck, but somehow I have the feeling that Pete Douglas is not the kind to give vegetables to people he doesn't like unless he's got some private joke going."

As the shovel hit the toe of Bill Johnson's work shoe at one o'clock that morning, Shultz commented, "I bet Pete Douglas has been telling a lot of fertilizer jokes. See how he likes this one."

"How did they kill him?" she asked the police surgeon an hour later.

"Gawd, Shultz, nothing I like better than determining cause of death on a body that's been underground unembalmed for three months. In this case, it's fairly obvious, however. Blow to the back of

the head from a blunt instrument. I'd say look around your suspect's apartment for a heavy lamp."

"Search warrant time," Shultzzy grinned at Meese.

"Mandy isn't gonna like this," Pete Douglas said as he unlocked the door to her apartment for the police officers. "She went into labor last night. Woke me up around four to call a taxi. You'd think she could do that herself, wouldn't you?"

Shultzzy nodded at Meese. It was time for Pete Douglas to be read his rights. She watched Douglas's face as the words rolled trippingly off Meese's tongue; it was not her imagination, Pete Douglas blanched.

"Hey, I don't know what this is all about, but I didn't have nothing to do with it. I'm just the super. I told you I haven't slept with her in months."

"What about your trip to Maine yesterday?"

"Maine? You must be nuts. I never been to Maine."

"We have a video, Mr. Douglas. You look different in a suit and tie, but not that different."

"So, big deal. Okay. She asked me to do her this favor, pretend I'm her husband so she could get some money out of the bank. Hey, she's having a baby. She needs the money. Said she'd give me half."

"It's fraud, Mr. Douglas."

"It's her money, isn't it? The guy ran out on her."

"Did he, Mr. Douglas?" Shultzzy's eyes gleamed. She took off her glasses. Her violet eyes were not seductive, however; they glittered like amethyst quartz, cold and sharp.

Pete Douglas licked his lips.

"In fact, Mr. Douglas, Mr. Johnson has turned up." Shultzzy paused. "In your garden."

"The baby's a girl," Mary Lee informed Shultzzy and Meese as they returned from booking Douglas. "Did he consent to the DNA test?"

"Yes. He still claims the kid isn't his. Let's hope," Shultzzy said quietly. "Mandy in any condition to be questioned?"

"They had to give her a Caesarean at the last minute. Doctor won't let you talk to her until tomorrow. What did Douglas tell you?"

"Everything. Guy's so scared he'll be sent up for first degree that he's squealing all over the place. According to him, Mandy lobbed her husband in the back of the head with the brass lamp because he refused to put her name on the C.D. Then she got Douglas to bury him and told Douglas the kid was his, not her husband's. He didn't believe her; that's when she offered to

split the money with him.”

Without makeup, Mandy Johnson looked almost human. She was obviously in pain from the surgery. Shultz was not sympathetic. She had requested that Mrs. Johnson not be given drugs until after their interview. Mandy read through Pete Douglas’s statement. She sneered as she handed it back to Shultz.

“The louse. You believe him? He’s the one that killed Bill. Now he’s scared and blaming it on me.”

“And why should he kill your husband?”

“Because he was jealous. Because I was pregnant with his kid and married to Bill, and Bill wouldn’t give me a divorce. Bill was convinced the kid was his. I told Bill I was leaving him and going with Pete regardless. He tried to haul me back into the apartment, and Pete whacked him with the lamp. It was a fight, that’s all. It got out of hand. Two jealous guys.” Mandy shrugged. “And now he’s scared. Blaming it on me, that way he gets out of a murder charge and out of marrying me and supporting his kid. So, what else is new?”

“Pete Douglas says he always used contraceptives. He doesn’t believe the child is his.”

“Well, he’s wrong.”

“No, Mrs. Johnson, he isn’t wrong. We had the baby tested. Her DNA does not appear to match Mr. Douglas’s. It does match Mr. Johnson’s.”

Mandy Johnson scowled.

“So what? It’s possible, I suppose, but it doesn’t change what happened. They were still fighting over me.”

“We’ll have to leave that up to the jury to decide,” Shultz said quietly. She was thinking of Baby Johnson, squinting up at her a few minutes before. Not for the first time in her police career did Shultz pray that a jury would send a kid’s mother up the river for a good long stretch.

It wasn’t until almost Christmas that Shultz got her wish. On the afternoon of the day Mandy Johnson was convicted of first degree murder, Mary Lee Kingsley tapped on Shultz’s office door.

“The Air Force is here to see you, Shultz,” Mary Lee smiled. Behind her stood the two Sergeants Arvilla. In her new mother’s arms, Willa Johnson gurgled happily.

“Mission accomplished,” the sergeants announced proudly.

Shultz saluted and then extended her hand to gently caress Willa’s soft cheek.

“Merry Christmas, little one,” Shultz smiled.

FICTION

Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple

by Judith
L. Post

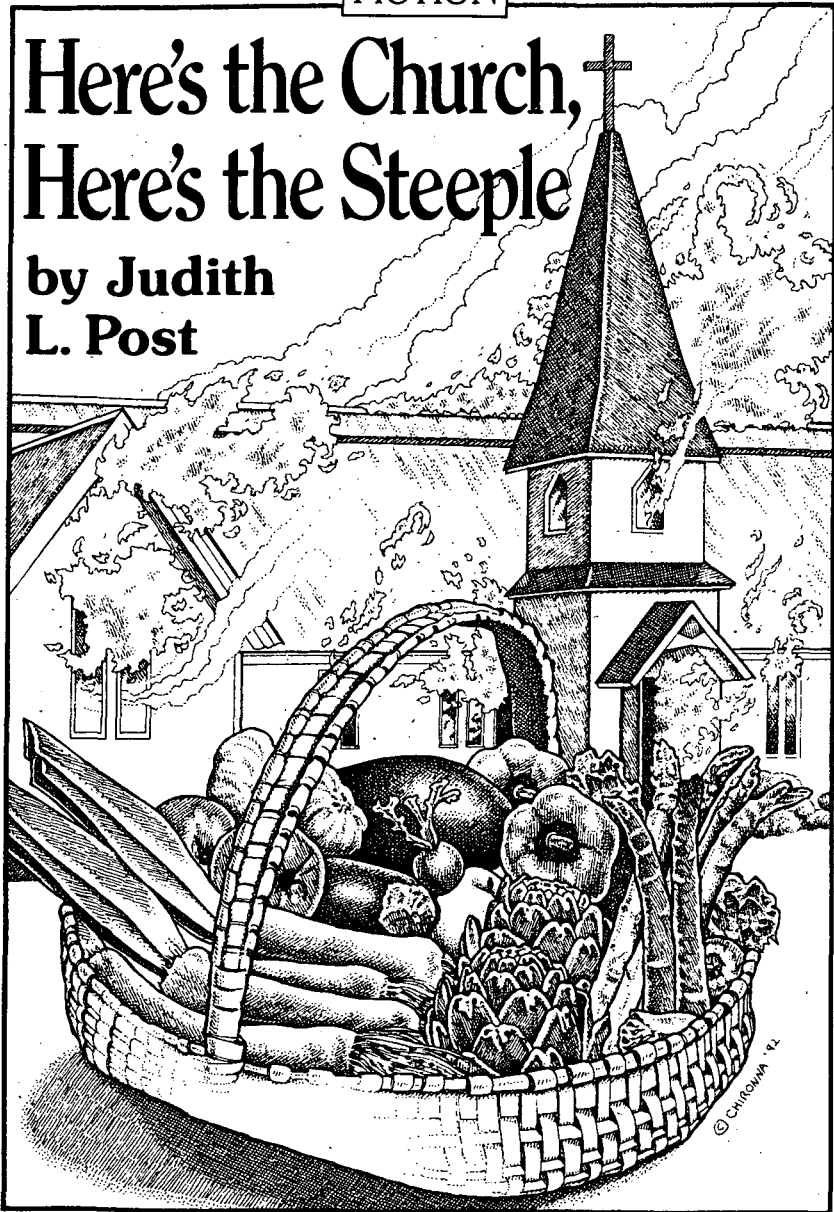


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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I only get to Brownville, Ohio, about once a month, which is about as much as I ever want to stop there. It's a small town in the middle of a vast, flat plain that makes up the central Ohio farm belt. Rich soil keeps the farmers there. Selling wine for a winery in Sandusky is what brings me there. The world hasn't heard much about the vineyards on Lake Erie, but Ohio has fine wineries that are beginning to develop a reputation for themselves.

Brownville is a small town of about fifty thousand with a couple of nice restaurants and a few cheap taverns. I have wines appropriate for all.

Like most small towns, if you weren't born there, you're an outsider. Oh, the townsfolk are friendly and they're nice to do business with, but everything stays pretty much on a surface level. I've been coming to Lombardo's and The Cadillac Inn for over four years now, showing them our best wines, and in all that time, I have only caught a scattering of gossip here and there. Talk about tight. If these people haven't known you from the time the doctor smacked your fanny, you're never going to fit in.

Of all the places, then, for my car to go out, Brownville had to be my last choice.

"Your fuel pump's gone bad," Ted Parker told me at the one Sunoco station in town. I always carry my Sunoco credit card with me in case of emergencies. "It'll be a day or two for me to order another one. Ain't got no rental cars around here. Guess you're kind of stuck." Kind of stuck was exactly right. There was only one motel in Brownville, and it wasn't what you'd call posh. Still, when you're a traveling salesman, you have to take these things in your stride. They come with the territory.

Ted promised he'd fix me up as soon as he could, and I walked the length of town to make reservations at the Clayton Courts. Clayton Courts is a fancy name for a single row of dingy motel rooms that haven't been renovated since Wilbur Clayton opened them almost half a century ago. Wilbur is a crusty old coot with a wispy white beard and sparkling blue eyes. In his youth, he married a local girl just long enough to get a sweetheart deal on a piece of land smack dab on the highway and his motel built at a discount rate by her kin before he divorced her. That never set well with the locals, but Wilbur isn't the type to care. He did a good business when the motel was in its heyday, and now he makes enough to get by. He doesn't socialize much by mutual consent, so he's usually happy to talk a bit when he gets a new customer.

"Got here just in time for the big scandal," he told me as he led the way to room number four.

"In Brownville?" I laughed. "You've got to be kidding."

"You big city people don't have all the fun. We might not have drug busts and nude dancing bars, but we got ourselves a church burner."

I thought of the tidy brick Lutheran church I'd passed on Main Street. "Your church looked all right to me."

He pulled at his beard. "Shows what you know. That church's back entryway was gassed and burned. The big cross on the front wall and the holy altar of the Methodist church on the south side of town both got charred. The Baptist church on County Road 300 is nothing but ashes. Even the parsonage on Webster Street got torched."

"You mean it's gone?"

"Naw, a neighbor saw the flames and the fire station got to it in time, but there's a lot of smoke damage—stuff like that. The parson's having to shack up in the church for the time being. Says that way he can keep an eye on things, anyway."

I shook my head. I'd have never figured Brownville for a place with an arsonist. The whole town shuts down on Sundays, not a store is open—an unlikely town to burn church property.

"Any leads so far?" I asked.

Wilbur shrugged his shoulders. "Lots of talk, that's all. People kind of shy away from Ira Kroft. He's the only atheist anyone knows in Brownville. A bullheaded, cantankerous old crackpot. Runs the hardware/plumbing store. Hasn't got a good thing to say about anybody."

"He'd have to be kind of stupid to tell everyone he's an atheist and then go burn their churches."

Wilbur had opened the door to Room 4, and I glimpsed a sagging mattress with a blue chenille bedspread that was nearly threadbare. A gold shag carpet had stains that were years old. A two day wait in Brownville was going to be lots of fun. "Make yourself at home," Wilbur said, handing me the key. "Maybe we'll have another fire while you're here to spark things up for you."

With a dry cackle he left, and I began to unpack the few things I'd brought with me. I always pack light, only carrying the essentials, so a quick trip to the drugstore was in order. Locking my room, I set off on foot once more.

All the businesses in Brownville are located in a two block area.

To reach them, I had to pass the Lutheran church. This time, I strained my neck to see the wooden vestibule in back.

"Heard about that, huh?" a voice asked behind me.

Inside the black wrought-iron fence, an old man was leaning on a shovel handle. His face was as wrinkled as a pug's, with the same large, sad eyes. "I'm staying at the Clayton Courts," I said. "Wilbur told me about it."

The old man snorted. "He would. Thinks it's the most excitement the town's seen in years. He's one of our volunteer firemen. Thinks it's a lot of fun to get dressed in his slicker and play with a hose." He shook his head slowly. "Ain't nothing fun about a fire. S'pose he told you about the fruits and vegetables, too?"

I must have looked blank because he continued. "Each fire, there's a pile of fresh fruits and vegetables left on a step. Picked the same day out of somebody's garden."

"Do you think whoever it is has a picnic or something before he sets the church on fire?"

"Don't know what to think," he said. "Just know it's a sorry business."

"At least your church can be fixed." I studied the vestibule. It was a total loss, but it could be knocked off and a new one built. The main brick structure seemed to be all right. "Wilbur said the Baptist church was completely destroyed."

He nodded. "Hear tell they're gonna set up chairs in the old schoolhouse on the County Line Road. Use it as a temporary place to worship." The door of the church opened, and a flock of ladies descended the front steps. "Women's Guild," he said. "Guess I'd better go in and lock up. Can't be too careful these days."

As he turned to leave, I headed downtown for the drugstore again. I was passing Kroft's Hardware Supplies when a tall man with thick, bushy gray hair lumbered out its front door. He nearly hit me with the ladder he was carrying.

"Sorry, didn't see you," he said.

I found myself pinned between the ladder and his big plate glass front window . . . or at least, what was left of his front window.

"Fool kids have taken it into their heads I'm the one tried to burn the parsonage down," he grumbled, inspecting the hole and shattered glass where a rock had sailed through the center of his window. "Just 'cause I got no use for religion, they think they have a case. Couldn't figure their way out of a paper bag—nothing but space between their ears."

I smiled. Even in small towns teenagers cause problems. The arguments sounded about the same.

"You're the wine fellow, ain't you?" Kroft asked, looking me up and down. "Lombardo says you're a decent fellow for a city guy."

"Thanks, I think."

His laughter was low and deep. "Got stuck here at a bad time, didn't you?"

"How did you know I was stuck?"

"This is a small town. Everyone knows everything." He moved his ladder to let me pass, propping it against the building so that he could tape a large piece of cardboard over his window.

"You're not going to fix it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not till all this is over. Might get broken a couple more times."

I thought about that as I walked the half block more to the drugstore. These people had known each other all their lives. Gossip spread faster than an epidemic. Yet it seemed to me they didn't know each other as well as you'd expect. No one knew who was burning the churches—and they didn't know their neighbors well enough to decide who wouldn't do it.

I bought as few essentials as possible. Prices are always jacked up at small town pharmacies. Then I used the pay phone in the corner to call my wife. It was a Wednesday, so she wouldn't be expecting me home; but I'd probably be later than usual on Friday . . . eight or nine, if I got lucky.

Back in my motel room, I freshened up and decided to go to Lombardo's for supper. I'd usually be in Columbus by this time of day, staying in the same room I reserved for myself once a month. On Thursday, I'd be in Cleveland; and on Friday, I'd be back home in Toledo. One of an endless number of circles I make each week.

As I sat alone eating my dinner, I wondered if being a salesman was something I really wanted to do for the rest of my life. My kids hardly see me during the week. Weekends go by in a blur; then I'm back on the road again. The thought of a nine to five job, glued to a desk, gives me the shivers, though. My wife and kids probably see me all they want to, and we all seem happy with things as they are.

I ordered dessert and told myself I was a happy man. This had just been a bad day, that's all.

Back in my motel room, I watched TV and tried to numb myself to sleep on the bumpy, musty-smelling mattress. I hoped Ted Par-

ker could fix my car fast. The sooner, the better.

Sunlight crept around the edges of the blinds, waking me the next morning. I hadn't dozed off until nearly two A.M., so I slept later than usual. My back ached as I pushed myself off the soft mattress. My joints felt stiff. I had to force myself to go to the window and peek out at the new day.

I was blinking against the light when Wilbur Clayton walked past, saw me, and waved. He hadn't shaved yet, and a toothpick hung out of the corner of his mouth, as if he was just returning from breakfast at Sadie's Cafe across the street. Seeing him reminded me that I'd heard the door to his unit slam shut at one o'clock last night.

He came to my door and I opened it a little, pulling my robe tighter around me.

"Sadie serves breakfast for another hour," Wilbur told me, "if you hurry yourself over there."

I could smell the aroma of bacon clinging to him. "Do you have another renter?" I asked, looking for a car. "I heard your door slam about one this morning. Can't be any fun having people come in that late."

His blue eyes narrowed, and a shutter seemed to close his face. "Must be mistaken," he said. "Or maybe the wind caught it."

I wasn't about to argue with him. "Maybe. Thanks for the tip. I'm starved. I'll give Sadie's a try."

He chewed on his toothpick and grinned. "Sadie'll never let you down. Believe me."

I decided to take his word for it. Fifteen minutes later, I was tossed together and heading across the street for some ham and eggs.

It was too nice a day to sit in a motel room. I was wandering in the park across from the courthouse when the old caretaker for the church found me.

"Kicking up your heels, huh?" he asked. "It'll be some hard work, but a few of us are going out to the old schoolhouse to clean it up a little for Sunday. Want to give us a hand?"

My surprise must have shown. I was a stranger in town. I didn't think I'd be included.

He guessed my thoughts. "Nick Lombardo vouched for you, and we can use all the help we can drum up."

I didn't have anything better to do, so I went along. Ted Parker

was there and Nick, along with the Baptist minister and a few of his church members. We cleaned up the yard and mowed the grass. We swept the floors inside and knocked down as many spider webs as we could reach. We set up metal folding chairs and dusted them off. It was a good day's work, and I was tired and hungry when we'd finally finished.

"Come back to the restaurant with me," Nick offered. "You've earned a free supper." He winked. "I happen to have some pretty good wines."

As we rode back to town together, Nick said, "These fires have the town in a real frenzy. Arson's a hard case to break. Rumors are flying everywhere. Ira Kroft's name and Wilbur Clayton's come up the most often."

"Wilbur Clayton? Why him?"

Nick grinned. "If you weren't sound asleep last night, you must have heard him creep out about one in the morning. He does that once or twice a week. He and Sadie—she owns the cafe across the street—have a thing going. They think it's a big secret, but half the town knows. Anybody who's over twelve has probably heard by now."

I smiled. "He told me it was the wind grabbing his door."

"Add his tiptoeing around at odd hours of the morning with his love of gearing up in his fire slicker, and pretty soon, people start talking," Nick said as he parked his car behind the restaurant.

"Those are awfully slim reasons, aren't they?"

Nick shrugged. "When people get nervous, they aren't at their best."

Fresh air and exercise, followed by a big dinner and wine, and I could hardly keep my eyes open. Guess I'm no spring chicken any more. Nick drove me back to the motel, and I propped myself in the front of the TV but nodded off during the local news.

At three o'clock in the morning, I came wide awake.

Something hard was hitting my window. Then loud splats sounded up and down the entire length of the units. I jumped to my feet and grabbed my robe. Pulling the drape back, I saw a large dark splatter in front of me. A truckload of kids drove by one last time, throwing ripe tomatoes at the windows. Then with a scream of "Church Burner," they peeled away.

Wilbur ran through the parking lot after them, and I could see why they'd raced off. He was pulling back the trigger of a double-

barrelled shotgun as he ran. By the time he had it up and ready, though, the kids were long gone.

He was turning to go back inside when he noticed me standing in the window. Wearily, he came toward me. I opened the door to let him inside.

Wilbur plopped on the end of the bed, his shotgun dangling between his knees. "Stupid kids!" he complained. "They're only using this as an excuse to pester me. The town and I have never exactly gotten along. We have what you might call a truce is all."

"They threw a rock through Ira Kroft's front window," I said.

"Teenage troublemakers! Haven't got anything better to do than drink beer and bother innocent citizens."

I had no idea how innocent Wilbur Clayton was, but I didn't think he deserved this. I could sympathize with him.

"Can you call the sheriff?" I asked.

Wilbur shrugged. "Could, but no reason to. Me and old Betsy here," he said, hugging his gun, "will sleep by the door a few nights. That should take care of matters."

It wasn't a solution I'd have suggested, but Brownville's business wasn't my concern.

As Wilbur left me, I sincerely hoped Ted Parker would have my car fixed later today.

I'd gone to Sadie's for breakfast, stopped at Ted's and been assured that my car would be ready by late afternoon, then returned to the motel room. I was packing my things when Wilbur came flying to my door, banging on it with all his might.

"Come on!" he cried when I flung it open. "We got a fire alarm. Thought you might like to join us."

Before I could answer, he was dragging me to his pickup truck and we were racing to the station. I thought surely one of the other volunteers would object to my coming until I looked up and saw Nick Lombardo, Ira Kroft, and the old caretaker from the church. Seems people in Brownville have to double up to get things done.

Wilbur pushed me onto the running board of the fire engine, and the driver gunned it. I hung on for dear life as we flew through town and toward County Line Road. We hadn't gone far before I realized where we were headed—the old schoolhouse we'd cleaned the day before.

When we screeched to a halt before its front steps, smoke was already billowing from the basement windows. A young woman

was poised on the top step, her arms full of vegetables picked from her garden.

"Oh Lord, it's Ginnie Samuels," Nick Lombardo whispered.

"What's she doing with all those tomatoes and things?" Wilbur asked.

"Don't you know your Bible?" Ira Kroft demanded.

The old caretaker gaped. "Do you, Ira?"

"Every book of it. Why do you think I'm an atheist?"

"I don't get it," Wilbur complained.

"The story of Cain and Abel," Ira said. "She's presenting her best offerings on God's altar."

Nick sighed. "We have to help her."

Ira nodded. "Take it slow. We don't want to rile her." He climbed off the running board and inched his way toward the woman. "Ginnie," he said, his voice pleasant and reassuring, "it's nice to see you again. Looks like you'll have a lot to freeze and can this year."

She looked at the produce cradled in her arms blankly, her movements dreamy, like sleepwalking. She looked back at Ira without really seeing him. He hesitated a moment. "It's a beautiful day today, and we sure are hungry. You wouldn't have some fresh tomatoes you could share with us, would you?"

She stared at him without speaking but when he took another step forward, she backed toward the door. "Don't come any closer, hear?"

Ira stopped. "Ginnie, Nick and Wilbur came, too. Would you like to come say hello to them?"

She chewed her bottom lip, considering, then bolted for the door. Ira hurried after her, but by the time he reached the top step, she'd slammed it shut and locked it.

Nick and Wilbur grabbed their axes. So did I. We all ran to the door and swung at it, trying to break it down.

"Ginnie!" Ira cried. "Come out of there, girl. Nobody's mad at you. We only want to help."

The sound of laughter came from inside. "Elizabeth died this morning. She's at the house. I'll fetch her when I'm done here."

Smoke was seeping through the cracks around the door. Ginnie coughed briefly; then, in a high voice, she began to sing "Nearer My God to Thee."

Cold chills ran up and down my spine. The hair on my arms stood on end. There was something eerie about hearing her song while the smoke billowed out of the building.

"Push!" Ira ordered.

The five of us hit the door with our shoulders in unison. Where our axes had splintered it from the casing, a loud creaking noise wrenched the air.

"Again!" Ira called.

On our second try, the door split and flew wide.

The old one-room schoolhouse was choked with smoke, but Ginnie was nowhere in sight.

"The basement!" Ira commanded.

Tears ran down my cheeks. My eyes burned. So did my lungs. I coughed my way to the steep steps that sank into darkness. The heat hit us as flames licked at floor joists and support beams.

Ginnie lay on the bottom step, motionless. I thought my lungs would burst before we reached her. Nick took her shoulders; I took her legs. Then we dragged her up the stairs and out of the building.

Wilbur collapsed to his knees in the fresh air, gagging up black phlegm. When Ira took Ginnie's wrist and felt for a pulse, there was none.

We stood silently, circling her body, watching the schoolhouse go up in flames. Cars and trucks pulled in beside us, but with one glance at Ginnie Samuels' still body, no one spoke. When the fire finally sputtered its last, they carried Ginnie's body to a nearby pickup. Ira rode in the back to take her to the funeral home. Nick went with Sheriff Morgan to fetch Elizabeth's body from Ginnie's bungalow in town.

The old caretaker looked at me and sighed. "Guess this all seems mighty strange to you, huh? But Ginnie's husband died two years back of a heart attack. Her little girl, Elizabeth, was born with a hole in her heart. It was just a matter of time before it couldn't pump enough to keep her alive."

I thought of the fresh fruit and vegetables left at the churches. Offerings to God. A silent prayer for Him to spare a daughter's young life.

As I climbed on the fire engine for our ride back to town, I understood how Ira might be an atheist. Me, I believe in God, but I sure don't understand Him. Still, I found myself praying.

"Please take these two souls to heaven and let them dwell with Thee."

This time around, everyone would have rather the arsonist had escaped free.

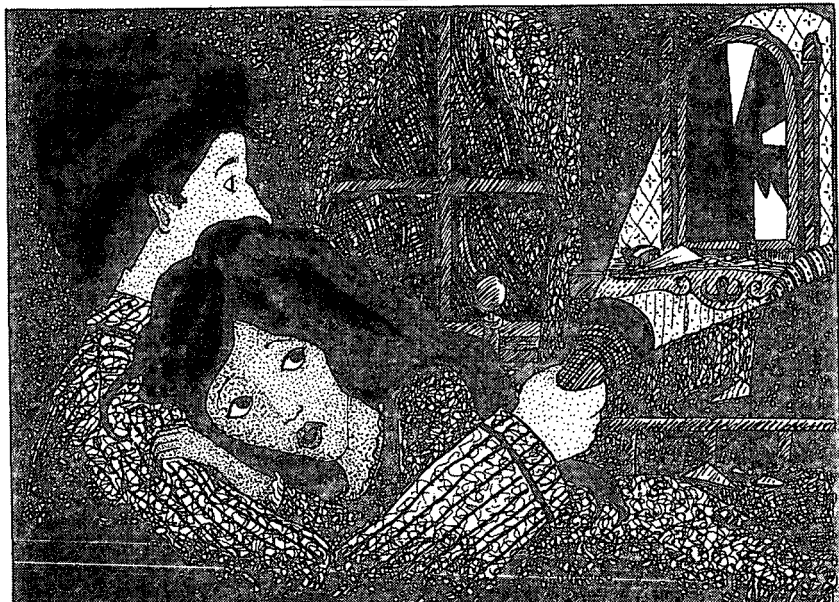
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by J. K. Potter

Intrepidly, under a light rain. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "January Contest," and write your name and address on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.



Pagan Island

by Robert Halsted

Iwent to Pagan Island for Christmas. Christmas, for us, never came that year, and I haven't seen the island since. Thank God. (A four times a year Low Church Episcopalian, I nonetheless cross myself at that.)

Pagan has been discovered now, by the developers and their customers. Perhaps the Hilton or the Marriott or whatever it is, and all the posh con-

dominiums, have exorcised the evil I saw manifesting itself there, decades ago now. More likely it still festers under their foundations, waiting to erupt later. I read every item I come across about it, but I have never wanted to go back.

Roger was to have met me at the mainland-side ferry landing, but his face wasn't aboard as the little vessel pulled into the dock. It was a round-bot-

tomed thing of a type I couldn't name, something like a large dory or a square-sterned whale-boat with a shaky wooden-framed canopy over it that kept part of the spray and weather off passengers and cargo.

Feeling a little lost and, more to the point, rather neglected, I dragged my two bags aboard, paid the deckhand who doubled as purser and steward, and for lack of a better place sat on my big suitcase with the weekend bag between my feet. My fellow passengers were a black family and a couple of local whites who avoided my eyes. After a jumble of cargo was stowed, the master cranked the ancient noisy engine and we cast off.

If I ever get seasick on a mile-and-a-half voyage, it will be one like that. There was a slight chop, deeper crosscurrents, and an erratic wind that swayed and rolled the boat, and I was definitely queasy by the time we hit the little cove where the dock sheltered on the island.

As we idled in I looked at the small cluster of folk huddled against the erratic weather, but still no Roger. Sighing in mild self-pity, I hoisted my luggage up onto the dock and clambered ashore from the gunwale, less gracefully than the locals.

For a stranger in a small iso-

lated place, I seemed to attract amazingly little attention; I felt like pinching myself to be sure I was really there. The man on the dock nearest me seemed to have at least the tail of his eye turned in my direction, so I approached him. "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me how to get to Sheffield's Farm?"

He aimed his thumb toward the broad path that led into the island. "Ask that Injun gal comin' down the road."

Off balance, I hesitated a moment, mumbled, "Thank you," and started up the path with my bags.

The "Injun gal" turned out to be a girl somewhere between puberty and twenty-one, with high cheekbones and large dark eyes that registered on me as beautiful in a tragic and haunted sort of way.

"Mr. Entwistle?" she half stated, half asked when I stopped to meet her.

I confessed to the charge. "That I am," I answered as lightly as I could. The mood of the island, or at least of the weather and the people I'd met, was beginning to get to me. "Somebody has finally admitted I exist."

A brief, sad smile flickered across her face. "Maybe we'll tell you all about it later." She gestured for me to put my bags down. "I've got a wagon com-

ing. Roger says to tell you he's sorry he couldn't meet you." The island had only half a dozen motor vehicles on it, laboriously brought over on a pontoon raft of oil drums, not without occasional loss. Most people walked, some rode horses with or without a buggy attached, and a couple of younger and braver souls dared motorbikes on the few miles of sandy road the island afforded. Roger's place was nearly three miles from the landing, and I was glad not to have to walk it with luggage that had been growing heavier since the last railway station back on the mainland.

Rather than stand awkwardly waiting, I sat on the edge of my big bag and turned the other on end for the girl. "Have a suitcase while we wait," I said to her.

"Thank you," she answered and perched daintily on the case, knees and feet demurely together and hands in her lap. Another instantaneous smile, this one not tragic.

"Are you a friend of Roger's, Miss, ah . . ."

"Elena. I work for him. I keep his house."

I intuitively felt the relationship was more intimate than that, though perhaps less intimate than what I was suspecting. Abruptly and to my

own surprise I put my underlying thought into words. "I have the feeling that I'm being avoided. Not just because I'm an outsider. Is there something wrong?"

"Roger has enemies. 'Tisn't my place to tell you. Maybe he will." Her accent was unlike any I would have expected to hear, with a faint suggestion of the lilting rhythm and soft vowels of Caribbean creole; neither Deep South drawl, nor the South-of-England coastal accent you could hear from Kennebunkport to Key West before TV homogenized the population, nor was it the least bit like the Geechee-Gullah talk of the local blacks. This strange child wouldn't come into focus for me.

In some ways I knew Roger intimately. We'd been in the army together, and afterwards had gone to the same college for a couple of years on the GI Bill till he dropped out, on his father's death, to tend to the family properties and I went on to get my degree. It struck me now, though, that some parts of his life were a closed book to me.

I was forming in my mind the words to quiz her, both to understand my own situation and to see if there was anything I could do to improve Roger's predicament, if predicament it

was. But then the wagon came lumbering and rumbling down the road, and I lost her attention.

"Here's Thomas now," she said and stood up. The ancient black driver swung his mule in a wide turn, and we walked up to the buckboard, which must have been about the same age as the driver and the mule. I lifted the big bag aboard and she the small one, and I was about to help her up when she climbed onto a spoke, put herself into the wagon, and held down a hand to help me. I felt thoroughly incompetent: I had no idea what kind of sociopolitical situation I had thrust myself into, I could understand only a few disconnected words of what she and the driver said to each other, and now I had to be helped into the conveyance by a slip of a girl.

The trip was not the most pleasant of my life. The turbulent grey sky spat occasional drops and drizzles into the open wagon, the driver's grim silence could have been cut with a knife, and the roadway, for all that it appeared to be deep sand, had an amazing number of solid bumps in it. It took the better part of an hour to get to the front gate of the Sheffield property.

"You get off heah," said the driver abruptly as he reined

the mule in, in a no-nonsense voice I'd learned to associate with sergeants. Elena hopped down, I handed her the small bag and awkwardly leapt off with the big one. I was reaching for my wallet when she gave Thomas two dollar bills.

"No, Roger's paying," she insisted. I didn't resist. I decided he deserved a penalty. Though it would have been easier for me to carry both bags, she took the little one and we started walking the quarter-mile to the house.

My strange and dysphoric mood deepened as we walked down the rutted weedy drive, the dripping Spanish moss on the overhanging live oaks brushing my head.

Under other circumstances I would have responded to my first sight of the house pragmatically: it needs paint, the lawn wants mowing, the shutters and shingles need attention. On my one previous visit I had seen the old Georgian frame building in prime condition and hadn't expected it to deteriorate under Roger's care. Now, after the last couple of hours, I saw it as haunted, brooding, presaging doom.

Elena led me up the steps to the front door. When we entered, I realized how dark it had become, late in the day and

with a thickening cloud cover; I could barely see the hallway. She flicked a light switch and nothing happened.

"Damn," she said. "Sorry, the power's off again. We're at the end of the line here, any time there's a wind or a rain we go out. I'll get a coal oil lamp out of the kitchen for you before night."

At another time, in a different mind-set, I would have been pleasantly impressed with my room, a bigger one than on my first visit when Roger's parents were alive: large and roomy; high ceilings, tall wide windows; on a good day the first impression would have been light and airy. It had a shabby elegance to it, a comfortable and careless old-money kind of feel. I smelled lemon oil where Elena, presumably, had just polished. There was no dust in sight.

"This is an old house, there's no closets in it," she said. "I'll hang your things in the wardrobe." She gestured toward a great mahogany piece.

"Don't bother. But thanks."

Something seemed to hold us there, unwilling to go our ways. Then she said, "I'll put on the coffeepot. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

"Thank you, coffee would feel good. I'll be down in a little while."

"Oh—the pump doesn't work when the power's off. I'll heat you some water from the cistern when you're ready to wash."

I told her I could wait till bedtime, and we parted with an awkward reluctance.

After I changed to dry clothing and put my gear away, I went down the dark stairway for the promised coffee.

"Do you want it in the dining room or the front room?" she asked.

"I'd be more comfortable here."

"He said you were special—he wouldn't like it if I didn't give you the right treatment."

"Roger and I have been through a war and part of college together. We shared a tent for two weeks without a bath. Don't worry—if he complains I'll straighten him out."

She relaxed then, and smiled her first really comfortable smile since we met. "I guess you're family, then."

The coffee was black and bitter, but good thick country cream took the edge off it. I couldn't help looking at her as I drank it, and she turned and caught me watching. We both flushed, I pinkly and she darkly. "Sorry," I said, "I didn't mean to stare." I meant to tell

her how pretty I found her, but too bashful, -I explained instead, "I was just thinking you don't look full-blooded Indian."

"They call me 'that Injun gal,' but actually I'm a quarter Indian, some French and Spanish—my grandfather was from the Islands—and the rest is local white." She grinned impishly. "Maybe a little touch of the tarbrush from down the Islands, nobody in the family talks much about that." If the delicately flared nostrils and shapely, full lips were evidence, I didn't object even in those days of different perceptions.

As if under a compulsion to explain herself, she went on: "My mother died when I was very small. My father brought me up. I have aunts and uncles around the island, but we don't have much to do with each other. When Daddy died a couple of years ago, Roger was kind enough to take me in and help me finish school."

"Roger has a good heart. Some of the things he's done for me..."

For whatever reason, she seemed near tears. She turned quickly back to the bottled-gas stove, and I sat alone with my thoughts again.

After a couple of minutes I surprised myself again by saying abruptly, "Elena. Is Roger

in trouble, does he need help?"

She turned from the stove, eyes moist in the dim light from the window. "I just don't *know* what's going on. I mean I know part of it, but not the *real* trouble. Please find out." I realized then that she loved him very much, that it wasn't just a case of the orphan girl taking the main chance.

"I will if I can, Elena."

She thanked me, almost formally, and became suddenly businesslike. "You'll have to put up with the glare," she said. "I can't see to cook right by the oil lamp, I have to light the Coleman." She pumped up a gasoline lantern and lit it expertly, set it on top of the old golden oak icebox, and began heating a big old cast-iron skillet. I watched her sidelong, not to be caught staring again, as I finished my coffee. She gave the impression of being much older than I had thought she was as she stirred and chopped efficiently. I found myself thinking with envy that Roger had a good thing here: a devoted young woman, at least pretty and maybe beautiful—the longer I watched her the better she looked—who was also competent. I hoped he would make an honest woman of her.

"Anything I can do to help, Elena?"

"You're a guest, Mr. Entwistle."

"My name is Fred, and if Roger were a guest in my house I'd put him to work."

She smiled a quick, faint little smile.

"You could get those oil lamps off the top cabinet. Light a couple, if you know how to use them, put one in the dining room and one in the front window. I hate to get coal oil on my hands while I'm cooking."

I took down four half-full ones from the row on the high shelf. They all needed attention, so I took my army-knife scissors and paper towels, trimmed the wicks, and polished the chimneys. I thought I got an admiring look from her when she saw the clean crescents of pale flame shining through sparkling chimneys. I put one on the sideboard and another on a table at the front window, turned up just short of smoking.

Apart from the heat of the kitchen, the house had grown quite chilly. On considered impulse I built a modest fire in the dining room. Partly to warm the room, partly to stay out from under Elena's feet as she worked, and more than a little to fend off the pervading feeling of chill and dark that was more than merely physical. Finally I went back into the

kitchen, where I had really wanted to be all along.

"Smells delicious," I said. "Fried chicken?"

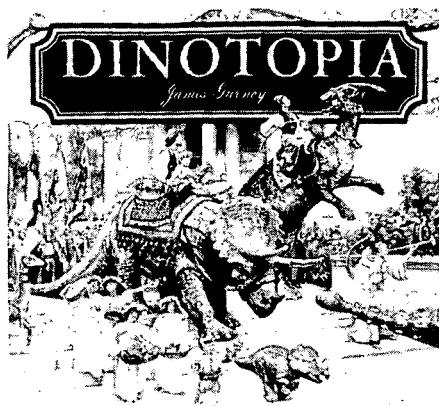
"Fricasseed. Fried first, then sort of stewed in its own gravy. Roger loves it." My heart gave a little twitch at how invested this dear child was in Roger, and how whatever was wrong was gnawing away at her. "Rice, and greens, and mixed vegetables, whatever was still growing in the garden. I made some yeast bread but it's been too cold for it to rise, so we'll have biscuits. But I make *good* biscuits, a lot of clabber and just a little soda. I hate biscuits where you can taste the soda."

So did I, and I said so. But I thought I would like Elena's biscuits, whatever they were like.

She put the covered skillet of chicken and the pot of wet, sticky, Southern style rice in the oven to stay warm, turned off the fire under the vegetables, and mixed the flour, salt, and soda in a bowl. "I won't start the biscuits till he gets here. I wish he'd let me know. He didn't used to do this way." The tragic look came back to her eyes.

"Sit down and have a cup of coffee. You've been working for hours." She protested a little, then joined me at the kitchen table. "Elena, what is going on?"

WORLDS OF WONDER THAT CHARM, ENTERTAIN & INSPIRE

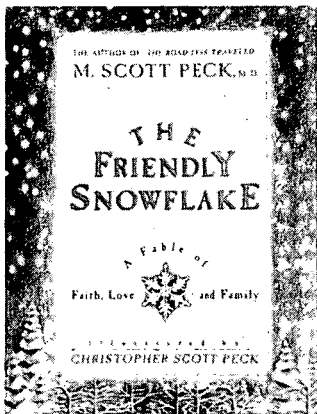


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You certainly know more about it than I do. Tell me all you know."

"That's just it," she answered in despair. "He's got some kind of a feud. I don't know who with nor what about, I just know a little about it. He just says 'business,' but I think it might have something to do with his family, you know?"

I knew. Roger had spent hours talking with me about it over the years. There was a good bit of money in the family, but not enough for the greedy heirs to buy each other out. When the old man died, Roger got the homeplace, which he had wanted, and almost no money to restore and maintain the house and recapitalize the much deteriorated farming operation. He had, however, had a plan to hold things together with his meagre savings and some GI money and bootstrap it back into what it had been before his mother died and the old man turned bedridden. The plan, from what I saw around me, must not have worked.

Why this would keep him out late of an evening, I didn't know. The other heirs were scattered from Atlanta to Charleston, and the Drinking Brother had gone off somewhere. But I put it in the back of my mind to chew on.

It was a quarter of nine when

the old hand-cranked country phone startled me out of my skin by ringing. It hadn't occurred to me that, with the power off, the phone would be working. It rang two longs and a short, I'll never forget, and Elena was up and running for it like a startled rabbit.

She came back smiling. "He'll be here in fifteen minutes. He says to apologize to you." She caught her breath. "I'll go start the biscuits now."

I was helping her finish setting the table and had begun to light the candles when the front door opened. She put down a handful of silver with a clash and ran to meet him.

Looking around the corner of the door, I saw a grim look on his face the instant before he saw her coming and put a smile on. They hugged, he kissed her on the forehead, she took him by the hand and led him to me.

I'd wondered if Roger and I, despite our mutual Anglo-Saxon reserve, would rush into each other's arms and end up in a Spanish *abrazo*. We didn't. We were more reserved even than usual, a solemn hand-shake, too serious for a smile. I knew then he'd invited me because he needed me—not, I suspected, for any practical purpose, but for moral support.

Whatever his worries, he put

them aside for the meal. He put Elena at the head of the table between us—"after all, she's the boss here"—and our conversation was full of catching up on each other's news, a few nostalgic bits, and a lot of talk about the island he was so proud of.

"There's a little tongue of the Gulf Stream curls round in an eddy here," he told me. "Keeps us warmer than the other islands. We get a lot of fog, but only a couple of hard freezes a year. Barely 'nough to sweeten the collards." He told me about his winter vegetables, and some of the history of the old place from pre-Revolutionary days. I began to see why he was so attached to the house and land, and why the other heirs envied him. My first visit in our younger days, we'd had more adolescent concerns on our minds. I thought he might be leading up to a discussion of his problems, but if so it wasn't to be in Elena's presence; he kept heading me back when I approached the subject.

Perhaps she sensed this. After a delicious buttery peach cobbler, smothered in thick cream, that surprised and pleased me—though Roger took it as a matter of course—she said, "I'll just stack the dishes for tonight till we have water. Fred, I'll start you a lit-

tle cistern water heating now so you can sponge off some."

I offered to help, but she assured me that Roger and I had a lot of things to talk about, which was true, and that she could take care of everything, which I was sure she could.

While she carried things and clattered in the kitchen, Roger poured us a large glass of sweet California port—his drinking habits seemed to have moderated since college days—and we sat at the table talking of everything but what needed talking about. After a while she came in and informed us she was going to bed now.

"Your bucket of water is staying hot on the back of the stove, Fred," she said. "Don't forget to turn the burner off." She gave Roger a sweet and demure goodnight kiss, then, after a moment's hesitation, gave me as good a one. I felt myself blush a little, but not in displeasure. She went on up, leaving us alone.

When she was out of earshot I said, "I envy you your wisdom. Get a young one and bring her up right."

He grinned sheepishly and shook his head. "Didn't seem to work in this case. She had a real crush on me when she was about nine years old, but I'm afraid she outgrew it."

"She's in love with you."

He shook his head again, more vigorously. "No, she *loves* me. That's a big difference." I felt suddenly young and inexperienced, though I was his age. He was right, and I'd never learned enough about people and men and women and love to have seen it. "I want to get her off this island, away from her family, send her to college. They want to keep her drug down to where they are, one step better'n swamp rats. She wants to do better. I want her to do better."

"But you still hope she'll come back to you."

"I don't deny it. If she came back with her degree in hand and said she wanted me, she'd get me. I know better than to expect that. But there's no part of me I've forced on her. I've given her a job, that's all there is to it. I've offered her an education. Her family lets her work here because she kicks back some wages to 'em—they don't care what I'm doing with her, though I'm *not*—but they won't give permission for her to go away to school. She can go when she's of age, or maybe I can buy 'em off. That's one of the things I'm working on right now."

"Speaking of which, Roger . . . we've known each other a long time, don't be offended. This place looks *neglected*. I

don't have a lot, but I've saved some . . . could I sort of invest in a turnip crop or whatever you most need it for, help you get the place back on a paying basis?"

He laughed, a kind of laugh I'd heard from him once or twice before in a battlefield situation. "'Preciate it. Freddie, I've got money. Ten or twelve thousand in the bank at interest—" those were real silver-backed dollars worth five or six of ours, remember—"and I could realize that much more from . . . casual liquidation. Nobody will work for me. Every lick of work that's been done around here the last year, 'Lena and I did. Somebody's got 'em scared off."

"So hire a hand from the mainland. I'll hire one for you."

"Tried it. One lasted a week, the other'n three days. Snakes in their beds, funny noises in the dark. No need to try any more. It could get worse, maybe bloody. Nope, I've got to get to the source. Her family or mine. There's voodoo stuff involved, maybe put-on, maybe real. I'm half scared of that, and the people who do it." He chuckled, maybe the least bit hysterical. "The hoodlums who do hoodoo."

I thought a moment. "I don't suppose the police would be of any use."

He shook his head. "One dep-

uty on the island, he's also the J.P., and he may be one of them. Nope, the law around here is more . . . tribal. And somehow I got in the wrong tribe. Oh, I got friends on the island. Some of 'em, our families've been friends for generations. Hmp. Fair weather friends. Meet 'em over the county seat, they shake hands and buy me a cup o' coffee. Meet 'em at the village, they look both ways before they say hello. Scared to give me the time of day, they'd wet their pants if the wrong folks saw 'em bein' friendly to me. They could help me out without costing 'em a penny, let their kids do a little day's work for me. Somebody's workin' on 'em, but they won't give me any facts."

A look of pained disgust crossed his face. "I don't know why the hell I called you down here. I thought maybe it would all stop and we could have a country Christmas together. I thought you'd come up with a magic trick. Hell, I don't know what I thought."

"You thought it might be good to have somebody around who wasn't part of it and would be on your side."

He was silent again. "Preciate it, old buddy. Reckon all I did was spoil *your* Christmas."

"Not spoiled, Rog. Let's make it a real Christmas anyhow." I

thought a moment. "I've only read about it in books, but I've always wanted to try it. I don't suppose there's a goose on the island?"

"Might be a country ham in the smokehouse, and a couple of nice fat cull hens. Suppose that'd feed the three of us?"

I supposed it would. We made plans for a festivity no one else would come to. Whistling in the dark, as it turned out, but it cheered us for a while.

Christmas Eve dawned almost tropical. The light breeze had shifted to the south-east, there were only occasional ruffles of high white cirrus between us and the low-lying golden sun. Roger started the ham soaking in a washtub after breakfast, killed the two chickens, and left Elena dressing them as we walked through his woods looking for a tree. There were only a few cedars, none the right size or shape, so we came back with eight feet of better than average slash pine.

We spent most of the morning in Christmas preparations, mostly though not full time forgetting the gloomy outlook that had depressed us the night before. After lunch I borrowed a bike from the carriage house, pleading forgotten toiletries, and pedaled to the village.

There again I underwent silence and covert scrutiny.

There wasn't much in the village shop, but I managed to find a scarf and a bit of costume jewelry that I thought would go well with Elena's warm dark coloring, another gimcrack or two for Roger—I'd brought him from town a fifth of Wild Turkey and a then novel Swiss Army knife—and enough gaudy paper to wrap them in. I carry that knife today, though the small blade has been honed to a sliver over the years, and the tip long ago broke off the big blade and it has been reground to a shorter blunter one.

As I paid the shopkeeper she said, "You're the young fellow that's visiting Roger Sheffield, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We don't see him much in here any more. Me and my husband, we've been meaning to drop by and say hello to him, but you know how things keep comin' up. Tell him Miz Dowdey said Merry Christmas."

"I'll tell him."

It was dusk, I had finished wrapping my little purchases and Elena had put down dough to rise for morning sweet rolls and gone upstairs when a child of the island, darker than the night already showing over the Atlantic, came to the back door and spoke to Roger. I hardly got

a word of it; a much harder language than the Caribbean creole I could understand a little of. Roger, concerned and serious, went to the hall tree for his old Eisenhower jacket and came back through the kitchen. "Got some business up the road a ways. Y'all go ahead and eat. Don't wait up for me—I may be late."

"What shall I tell Elena?"

"Just what I told you." He left.

When she came down I told her. At first she was exasperated at his taciturn attitude, then more anxious as she thought about it.

"What did the kid look like?"

I tried to tell her, but all I could really give her was approximate size and color. I saw the child as an exotic, an example of an alien type, and not as an individual. She was a little impatient with me, too, I thought, but trying to be nice about it.

He had hardly been gone an hour when the wind shifted and picked up. Soon we had a brisk nor'easter driving a cold rain against the windows. Shivering—somehow this weather chilled me in a way it wouldn't have up North—we built a fire in the living room, and after we finished supper in the kitchen I poured me a bourbon and branch and we sat on the sofa

talking of anything but Roger's being out in the weather.

"Whoever wanted to see him will probably put him up for the night," I finally said. "Besides, he said not to wait up. He might have actually planned to stay over."

She got a maybe-but-I-doubt-it look on her face. "I'll have a drink of that, too," she said.

I mixed her a light one—she somehow didn't look like a very skilled drinker—and changed the subject again. After a couple of drinks she loosened up considerably. We had been chatting inconsequentialities for a while when she abruptly said, "I'm a virgin." Then she giggled, as I suppose sweet young drunken girls have giggled since time began. "I don't know why I had to say that. I wanted you to know. Everybody thinks Roger and I are sleeping together. I wanted to tell you." She giggled again.

"But you're in love with each other." I suppose that more than anything else I was testing out Roger's earlier statement.

She shook her head. "I wanted to marry him when I was in the third grade. He wants to marry me." She seemed near tears now, with the lability of the inexperienced drinker. "I've never loved anybody in my life like I love

Roger. Sometimes it's like he's my father, and sometimes it's like I'm his mother." She took one of my cigarettes off the coffee table, lit it, inhaled, coughed, hiccuped. "But there's something that isn't there." She looked for more words.

"Roger's a good man," I answered cautiously. "You could do worse. I've known very happy marriages on that basis." I was beginning to feel the liquor myself. "I mean, where they just respected and liked each other and thought it was a good thing to do."

"What I'm really trying to say," she persisted, and hiccuped again. "What I mean . . ." Somehow we had worked dangerously close to each other—maybe the sofa sagged in the middle—and I realized we were sort of leaning toward each other and I knew what I wanted, wanted far more than I had ever wanted an obedient little Oriental prostitute or two American college girls or the smooth, cool, socially acceptable post-debutante hovering to close in on me. I wanted her not with my ego, but with some much deeper and more primitive part of me, and I had to stop myself. Her too, I didn't realize till a long time later.

"Elena. Who's persecuting Roger, who hates him enough to do all this?" I was sure she

knew more than she'd said, at least unconsciously, and I thought some new information might pop out in her present state. But mostly I needed to get my mind off the other subject.

She was shaken, off balance. "My family. His family. It's con—con—complicated."

"Tell me about it." Suddenly I was grateful for the dry discipline of law school.

"My family wants his money, but they don't want him to have me. They want me to trick him and get a lot of money and bring it to them and keep me under their thumb." The tears broke through. I had to put a hand on her shoulder, as lightly as I could. "I hate them *all*! They killed my father."

I hadn't expected this. "Killed your father? How?"

"They drove him to his grave. They were *unkind* and *cruel*. They used *voodoo*. He died *sad*; God damn them! He *loved* me, and he died *sad*!" She put her head on her knees and wept. I won't say how much I wanted to take her in my arms. What I did instead was to stroke her back, as objectively as I could.

She finally ran down. Well-advisedly or not, I fixed us both another stiff drink. "I thought only the blacks used voodoo," I said when she was leaning back, drink in her hand.

"There's *connections*," she said obscurely. "There's people in my family who do a little voodoo. If you paid enough money for it, you could buy a voodoo spell. You'd have to pay a lot more because you're an outsider. And sometimes they *work*. They drove my daddy crazy and made his heart wear out." She bit back more tears. "That's what's got everybody scared to treat Roger *decent*."

In a rush to shore up her objectivity, not to mention my own, I asked, "What about his own family?"

"They hate him for getting the house and land. They didn't *love* it, they just wanted to sell it to a development company. They're suing him at the county seat."

"Suing him? After all this time?" My legal ears perked up.

"It's been dragging on a couple of years, he says."

The old man, known as a stubborn old crank but certainly competent as measured by business success, had been dead a good six years. Three or four years after the fact would be an odd time to contest a will. I decided to look into it when I passed through the county seat on the way back home. And when sober.

Just then the old grandfather clock struck twelve, reminding me that I was very tired and

reminding us both that Roger was still out in the weather. Which turn of phrase took on new meaning later. What I said to her, though, was: "Merry Christmas, Elena."

"Merry Christmas, Fred." She looked worried.

"He said not to wait up. Let's go ahead and get some sleep. So you can cook us all a great Christmas dinner."

We went up the broad old stairway together, our hands touching once in a while. When we got to the head of the stairs she held the lamp to light me to my room. I went in, fumbled with my Zippo and got my lamp lit, then came back to the door to wish her goodnight. After an awkward moment we kissed very innocently, and I watched her all the way down the hall, slender and graceful, the lamp-light swaying with her. At her door she flashed me a sweet shy smile before she disappeared.

I decided to have a long talk with myself in the morning when both of me were sober.

I dreamt hard all night, but all I remembered of it. Christmas morning was an endless drudging dream of legal writs with much more emotional material behind it.

The worst of the blow was over. The weather had settled into a slow, chill northeasterly

that seemed at first to be driving a drizzly rain, but when I looked closer I realized it was blowing banks of fog that condensed as they moved. I stared in wonder; I had never seen windblown fog before, only the dead still kind, and I've only seen it once since. On a Florida vacation that was supposed to be dry and sunny.

After I dressed, I checked Roger's room. It hadn't been slept in. I went on down to the kitchen, which was cold and empty. I started a pan of water boiling, less for coffee or shaving than to have a visible fire against the elements.

It was only a little after seven, but I found myself obsessively concerned about Roger. I tiptoed back upstairs and, feeling quite guilty, peeked into Elena's room to see if he was there, whatever they both had said. At first I thought he was, then realized she was hugging her pillow. And I realized the feelings I had felt the night before were my real ones.

Still driven by the obsession, I looked on the hall tree and in closets and finally remembered the oilskins hanging on the back porch. I put them on and, for lack of any rational plan, started into the ground-level raincloud up the path Roger had taken the evening before.

I found him just before I got

to the property-line fence. He was awkwardly sprawled across the path in the shirt and slacks he had been wearing before the weather changed, his Ike jacket half off him, soaking wet. The fog was drizzling onto him and the Spanish moss on the tree above was steadily dripping.

There was no doubt even from thirty yards away, but I forced myself to go on. He was cold as a clam, curled up in a hard rigor mortis, dead white. And where his throat had been was a gaping wound, blanched into the color of soaked liver by the rain.

I retched, turned away, started back toward the house, then went back and covered him with the slicker I was wearing.

That day was a nightmare, most of it lost to memory but fragments of it standing out like bloodstains on snow.

I got back to the house soaking wet, shivering with the cold and with a fear that was from more than finding a dead body: there was an eldritch and primal quality to it. I think right then I believed voodoo could summon elemental monsters to devour a man, for that was where my mind-set was.

With shaking hands I found Elena's old fashioned coffeepot and started it perking. Then I

went up to wake her, dreading it.

I tapped on the door first, then pushed it open. She must have been already awake; she smiled a sunrise smile at the sight of me—I do remember that—and then clouded over when she saw the look on my face.

She knew, I think, before I awkwardly broke the news to her. She didn't get hysterical, as I had feared; worse, her sobs were quiet and deep, shaking me as I held her.

We managed to function through the day. She somehow fed me, though I don't think she took a bite till afternoon. I was going to go looking for the law, but she took the job away from me.

Which, I realized later, was the best thing I could have done for her. Had she not stayed busy she might have gone off the deep end. It was like the end of the world for her. For me, the death of Roger was as if the Federal Reserve had collapsed, but I had most of my funds in silver; for her, however, I realized with sharp intuition I didn't sort out consciously till later, he was hearth and home, emotional security, a place to invest her love and care, the nucleus of her whole life.

Men came, the J.P.-cum-dep-

uty and a couple of ablebodied, and I helped them put Roger's grisly, distorted remains on the island ice wagon to be stowed at the fish house pending disposition.

The whole process, including my informal oral deposition to the J.P. as representative of the law, took a couple of hours. I was soaked to the bone, shivering uncontrollably, and ready for pneumonia. The peachbloom beige of Elena's face was now a pale greyish-greenish color like the wet Spanish moss in the trees, her wide eye-orbits plum-dark, but she bravely built a roaring fire and put me before it with hot toddy in hand.

Then the real nor'easter hit, the beginning of three days of window-rattling winds, rain-drops hitting hard as hail, the whole house creaking.

That night, when it was bedtime, she said, "I can't be by myself. I've got to stay with you. Don't do anything, just hold me."

It was an option I'd thought of suggesting but felt would be gauche at best, offensive at worst, so I hadn't said anything. All bundled in flannels and wearing heavy socks, we turned in together after midnight, following a big mug of hot milk laced with whisky. We clung for dear life, not as lovers

but for animal security, for shelter from the elements and safety from unknown dangers. From ghosties and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night, and whatever long-legged beastie had torn Roger's throat out.

But when I woke in the small hours, felt her entwined with me and smelled the smell of her face next to mine, I wanted her, God how I wanted her. The Puritanical child of a dying Puritanical age, I felt obscenely guilty for that, given the circumstances. But after decades of life and knowing many deaths far and near, I have learned that death shocks the system into hungering for the renewal of life, and I accept that now as good.

We survived, somehow, the next couple of days, going through the mechanics of living without participating in life, thinking of nothing but what we were not speaking of, except when practical details had to be considered. Since she was already committed by necessity, she cooked the ham and chickens, but we mostly nibbled cold snacks from them. She moved the perishables from the iceless icebox to a cabinet on the porch, which was colder than a

modern refrigerator would have been.

The phone had given out when the hard blow started. There was no question of a funeral or any legal procedures at this stage; the island was a besieged nation and we were a besieged fortress within it, as were all the outlying households of the island. Contact with the mainland would resume after the storm was over, no sooner. At high tide the little creek near the house spread over into the sodden fields, and during momentary lulls in the wind we could hear the boom of the surf on the Atlantic side, nearly a mile away.

The strange effects began late the night of the twenty-sixth. For several reasons I had given Elena subtle permissions, finally open encouragement, to spend the night in her own room. I thought the self-reliance would be good for her, self-righteous know-all prig that I was in those days, but mostly I was frightened that only her physical strength and the strength of my character stood between my—our?—hunger and its fulfillment. My character was weakening, and I outweighed her by some sixty pounds.

She found us each a more or less working flashlight, and we went to bed with our doors

open. If she called, I was to go to her, and if she was tearful or fearful enough to need me, she could come to me.

We had both drunk enough that evening to hold down the grief and horror, and it took me a drugged moment to come out of my heavy sleep and recognize that the sound like a pistol shot, followed by a tinkling crash, was part of external reality and not a dream. It must have been around half past one.

I tangled my feet in the thick covers and half fell to the floor, recovered, grabbed the flashlight, and by its feeble firefly flicker went to her as quickly as I could.

She already had her light on, shining it at the dressing table. The mirror was in shards over the top and floor. She was, apparently, paralyzed with fear; at least she didn't speak or move, but only held the light rigidly, staring in horror.

My wits half awake now, I quickly shone my light around, looking for a stone on the floor, a bullet hole in the window, a heavy fallen object that could explain it. Nothing. One sharp dagger of mirror had come as far as the foot of her coverlet. As if, I later calculated, the mirror had exploded outward instead of being smashed inward.

Wordless, I went to her and

she reached for me and I almost towed her back to my room. We lay there clutching each other and shivering less from cold than from fear, never saying a word. We finally both dozed all the way off, and got something less than a night's sleep between us.

She tried carefully not to wake me when the first dull grey shone through the weather, but I was already lying there trying not to wake her. She smiled a feeble smile at me, and I gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead. "May as well give in and get up," I said. "We'll try for a nap later in the day."

"All right," she answered. "Let's go down together, okay?" I agreed. Too shy to dress in each other's presence and too fearful to stay apart long enough to dress separately, we bundled up in thick dressing gowns—she got one of Roger's, which gave me a funny feeling but seemed to feel right to her—and went, cold hand in cold hand, down the stairs together.

She was just starting the coffee when the phone rang, two longs and a short. I leapt up to get it. Before I got to it, it rang again, sharp and clear against the dull noise of the storm outside, two longs and a short again. But when I picked it up,

nothing. I spoke into it, shook the earpiece and rattled the hook, and there was nothing there but dead silence.

She had come up behind me. Speechless, I handed it to her, and she automatically swung the mouthpiece down to her level. "Hello? . . . Hello, hello?" Her eyes dilated and she shook her head. Then she held the hook down and cranked one double-long ring for Central. She let the hook up, held the earpiece to her ear, handed it to me. Totally dead phone.

The *events* kept on, most of them not totally impossible of a logical, material explanation. The mirror could have broken from thermal stress when the temperature dropped. (After being stable since Victoria's reign?) The phone could have rung from crossed wires (crossed with what?) or from some storm-induced electrical phenomenon. (Two longs and a short, twice in a row?) The hen-house latch might have opened itself and the chickens chosen to scatter into the storm in the middle of the night rather than stay in the shelter of the coop—certainly not many chicken thieves would have chosen to wade through the weather for that purpose. A second floor shutter that had stayed through a century or more's major hurricanes might have

chosen, by a fluke of wind, that night to drop straight down off the lee side of the house without disturbing the hingepins and brackets that held it.

The cumulative effect of events like these cannot be appreciated by those who have not endured them. By the night of the twenty-seventh we were nervous wrecks; totally ineffectual, we could only cling to each other and wait for the next blow to fall.

In the middle of the night a square yard of plaster dropped from the ceiling, missing our sleeping toes by three inches. We held each other tight for a good while before we drifted back to sleep.

The wind and rain stopped toward morning, and we woke to a sunny world of leaning icicles, all tilted toward the mainland at the tip, on Holy Innocents' Day, the anniversary of Herod's slaughter. One of the few ecclesiastical dates I remember.

Elena prepared us breakfast, a good old Southern-style breakfast, the first real meal either of us had wanted since I found Roger's body. Fried country ham, grits and biscuits and homemade preserves, her coffee that I had named "black lightnin'." She was frying the eggs when I heard a knock at the door.

We both nearly jumped out of our skins. "The eggs will ruin if you go," I said, and I went to the door, expecting a ghost at most. But it was a real live human, a middle-aged man who turned out to be the sheriff come over from the mainland.

"Mistow, uh . . . ?" he began showing his badge.

"Entwistle, Fred Entwistle. I was visiting here when . . . I'm the one who found him. We were just getting ready for breakfast. Have you eaten?"

"I et early, but you might talk me into a sup o' coffee."

After my reception on the island I was ready to be defensive, but he was pleasant. I asked him in and introduced him to Elena, carefully defining our roles in the household, and he was nice enough to talk weather as we ate, little commonplaces that required no answer and pushed no buttons. When we had licked our plates clean, or at least sopped them dry with biscuits, he brought up the business at hand.

"We figured, if y'all could come, we'd have the inquest this mornin' and get it out of the way, so you can get on with the, uh, funeral arrangements."

I gave him an eye signal and we excused ourselves to sit at the dining table. "Does she have to see the body?"

"We need an official identification."

"I've known him ten years. And almost anyone on the island, I think, could identify him. I don't want her to see what I saw."

He nodded. "I think we can protect her from that."

We dressed and crowded into his commandeered vehicle. With halting persistence it got us to the village.

The procedures were hard on both of us. Elena learned gruesome details I had no means of sheltering her from, and was somewhere past tears and nearing acute psychological collapse by the time it was over.

I tried to give some evidence that was disallowed, but at least the sheriff heard it for whatever that might have been worth. The lack of bloodstains on the ground by the body was dismissed because of the rain, though it hadn't been that heavy, and my observation that the position of the body didn't tally with his having died there was considered a conclusion by the witness and stricken from the record.

I knew I was ganged up on by the locals and that the coroner was no more—even less—a qualified medical examiner than I was, but I didn't want to jeopardize Elena and me by being contentious. There was

too much unfocused ill feeling in the air.

The verdict was death by misadventure. I've seen a lot of misadventures, but never before nor since one that left a ragged void where a man's larynx, tendons, veins, and arteries ought to be.

Then there were the funeral arrangements. I had hoped there was an Episcopal church on the island—no tearjerking eulogy, and in fifteen minutes the job's done—but we had to settle for an old-time Bible thumper who hadn't preached a good funeral in years.

When we buried him the next morning, it was a graveside service at the old family cemetery a hundred yards from the house. The preacher droned on and on for an hour and a half, all about an old island family and what a fine fellow Roger had been, with very personal reminiscences. Elena was in numb shock, dry-eyed beyond tears, before it was finished.

The local boatbuilder was also the coffinmaker, and the undertaker by default. The closed-thank-God coffin was oversized to fit Roger's remains, which they apparently had not got quite straightened out—I didn't ask. When we lowered it, it splashed where the water table was above the

bottom of the grave. I thought of Roger's macabre stories of inhabited coffins floating around after high water.

No one had been able to contact the relatives, but the whole island must have turned out for the show, all those who had snubbed Roger during the last year or two of his life, but only a few came up to us with condolences, and I was bitter about that.

An old farmer, awkward in seldom-worn Sunday clothes, came and shook our hands. "I reckon I'm one o' the ones that let him down when I coulda helped him," he said.

I came as close to a friendly smile as the condition of my face permitted. "No one else has had the good grace to say that. Thank you."

Elena's Uncle Poe said to her, "I reckon you'll be comin' home now." I took an instant distrust to him, not to say that he gave me the creeps, despite my not wanting to dislike anything pertaining to Elena. I hated the thought of her moving back in with him.

"I have some things to finish up here first," she answered. I discovered later he gave her the creeps, too. Partly because of unwelcome attentions she had been much too young for in earlier years.

She held herself together un-

til the crowd had gone and we were alone; then she collapsed against my chest and wept all the tears she had been fighting back. It hit me then that she was the first woman I had ever truly admired for her strength, admired in the intimate kind of way she had admired Roger. The fact that she needed some of my strength right then didn't detract in the least from this admiration: she had been strong for as long as she needed to, then had the wisdom to give in before she broke.

After she got it over with, she returned to normal functioning, next thing to cheerful. She made us a big plate of ham biscuits for lunch, and I decided it was time for a serious talk, though no longer a grim one.

"I'll have to leave soon and get back to my practice," I told her. "I don't want to leave you here, and . . ." I went into my feelings about the place and about her uncle, and the discussion became more and more ramified.

One of my unasked questions was answered. The law concerning late adolescence and early adulthood, from sixteen or eighteen to twenty-one, has at all times and in all places been an anomalous grey area. From the time she turned eighteen, in that state at that time—I hadn't studied for the

bar there, and there was a lot I hadn't known—she could obtain employment, marry, buy cigarettes, and sign certain kinds of contracts on her own. But she couldn't drink, vote, or register in a state-accredited college without a legal guardian's signature until twenty-one. (I could in theory have been sent to prison for giving her the soothing bourbon, but could have seduced her with impunity.)

So for a year and a half Roger had been asking her to marry him, demanding no connubial rights, willing to have it annulled later, only to send her to college. In a little moment of insight—I'd call it a psychic experience—I realized the depth of Roger's love for her, and her respect and affection if not passion for him. And I realized that in less than a week I had developed some feelings very similar to his, though I still found it shabby that my biological urges were intertwined in them.

"You can't stay on here alone," I said at the end of our discussion. "For one thing, I believe it's dangerous. We still don't know who wanted what, and what other tricks they'll pull. And you can't do all the work that needs doing here yourself. And there's no way to pay you for your services, not

even a household allowance, until there's at least a will found and an executor appointed."

We both sat silent while we thought it over, then both started to speak at the same time. "Ladies first," I said.

"I was just thinking, I could go over to the mainland and get a job in a cafe. I'm a good cook, I can sort of act like a lady and set the table right and all. They say waitresses make good tips."

I blenched and grimaced inwardly. This was the girl Roger had wanted to get a college education for and, if throwing his heart at her feet would do it, to set up as lady of his manor. "He wanted more for you than that."

We argued and counterargued for a while, and agreed finally on a rough plan: We would both stay on a few days and finish necessary jobs at Sheffield's Farm, I would see her safely to the mainland and lend her a small grubstake while she looked for a job in the city. Then she would consider my offer of a larger loan or grant in his memory, as it were, and a modest maintenance to further her education. It was a much longer and more complex process than my summary suggests.

We began the physical jobs necessary to close the house up

till legal processes should assign it to someone's care. I dug through his papers—feeling intrusive—looking for addresses of his relatives and his attorney. I found a lawyer, I hoped the right one, but no relatives.

We had about two days' work left to do when the last strange event occurred. We had gone to bed earlyish, tired enough for me to have no more than a light nightcap of bourbon for my still raw nerves. She had only had a small glass of milk. We hadn't had any incidents since we buried Roger—I did some serious if inconclusive thinking about that—but I was afraid to let her sleep alone lest something violent happen again. And I estimated that another two nights was about all the self-control I had left. You'd think if you could resist one night you could resist forever, but that wasn't my experience.

It was in the dead of night, probably around two o'clock, when she shook me awake.

"Fred! We have to get out of here!"

"Mmph?"

"We have to go. Roger came to me in a dream and said, 'Don't spend another night in this house.'"

"Right now?" What I thought was not that she was hallucinating or overinterpreting, but that Roger had come to her in

a dream. Just like that. It's what I still think.

"Not right now. We have to go in the morning. I'm sorry I woke you." She went right back to sleep, leaving me to toss and turn a while.

The next morning we packed, wishing for a working washer and dryer. I still took her seriously, after sleeping on it the rest of the night, and I'm glad I did. The power was still off, but we were able to get a phone call through for transportation to the ferry. Just us and our luggage and a few keepsakes for her. I threw the main switch in case we'd left anything turned on or plugged in; she set the Coleman and the oil lamps out on the back porch and put the box of wooden matches in the icebox after we'd put the scraps of food out for the wildlife. Then we locked the house and sat on the steps waiting for the island's one taxi.

Roger's will, I learned at his attorney's office, had been recently changed. I was executor and residual heir. Elena was major heir, and there were no others. It took years—another subject—to fight off the last of the relatives, his and hers. What was really interesting was what Roger's lawyer told us after calling the island for

some needed details. "The house burnt down last night," he said. "They were still looking for y'all's bones in the ashes till I told them you'd been here since yesterday. They said it looked like somebody'd flooded the whole downstairs with kerosene and fired it. It blew up before it burnt."

There were questions, and the state fire marshal's office investigated, but we were never seriously suspected. They never caught whoever actually did it, though I had some suspicions of my own.

And now that I've written this, I think I'll just consider that I've gotten it out of my system and junk it. I meant to figure out all the answers as I wrote it and present a finished package, but I have no more idea now than I did thirty-some years ago who or what killed Roger, what caused the ghostly manifestations, who fired the house.

But Elena saw it on my desk and read it, thinking it was another of my long and circumstantial stories for the grandchildren.

"But I've known all along, honey," she said. "At least, I've been sure since after about a year, and I suspected right away."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about it." And I hadn't, and I'd thought she hadn't, so neither of us ever brought the subject up. But now the horror was so far past it had a sort of unreal, historical quality to it.

"So please tell me all about it." I thought a moment. "Beginning with how Roger was killed."

So she did. "Well, that should have been the easy part. But I never knew the details till the inquest, and we were so busy thinking about ghosts and things by then that I missed it. I didn't *see* it, but what was in the coroner's report was so horrible I just sort of shoved it away. But if it was—" she shuddered "—a *ragged* wound, it wasn't an axe or a machete or something like that, a human didn't do it. There were no panthers or bears or anything on the island. It had to be Poe's dog."

I wasted a moment looking for literary references and found only a cat; the blank look stayed on my face.

"My *Uncle* Poe," she explained. "It was the only animal on the island that could do something like that. It was a huge thing, part pit bull and part I don't know what else, and he'd trained it to be vicious. If Roger had come up when the

dog was off the chain at night, especially if he was—you know, looking for trouble and the dog *smelled* it—well, the dog would have attacked him.

“And naturally Uncle Poe wouldn’t want . . . his *body* on the premises. So he moved it somehow, maybe on horseback. And left Roger in his own woods.”

“And you didn’t—excuse me.”

She squeezed my hand. “No, I *didn’t*. I *still* don’t know whether I *should* have. I was never *sure*, I couldn’t *prove* it. And there *is* something to . . . well, one is *inhibited* blowing the whistle on one’s own family. No matter how loathsome the family. It’s biological programming or something.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“Besides, I didn’t even *think* about it for weeks, I was blocking the whole affair. And then it was pretty late to say anything, even if I could have. And it was already too late for anything I did to save Roger, or bring him back.”

I spent a moment reminiscing about those days. Our confused, turbulent, beautiful courtship days, the pains and fears of them glossed over by time, the joy and sweetness of them standing out like pink magnolia blossoms against the blue of an early spring sky.

“But what about your dream and the fire?”

“Uncle Poe set the fire, too. It had to be him. Roger’s relatives all used lawyers, they weren’t *savage* enough for even hired arsonage—does that word exist?”

“It does now. In the legal trade we usually say just ‘arson,’ but please go ahead. Specifically, how did Poe know you wouldn’t be there, when everybody else thought we were still in the house? And why did he want to burn the house down in the first place?”

Elena opened her eyes wide. Her big beautiful warm brown eyes, not tragic for these thirty-odd years now except for about thirty-six hours when Rodgy was three years old and critically ill. Mine have faded from washed-out blue to a sort of nondescript grey, but hers have gotten warmer and richer.

“But he didn’t want to burn the house down,” she answered patiently. “He wanted to kill *me*.”

It was my turn to be astonished. “His own niece? And a stranger along with her?”

“You never knew Poe very well. I did. See, he was my nearest living relation. He was my heir, if I’d died. And he knew—and I *know* he knew, though I couldn’t prove it—that Roger had changed his will and

I'd inherit something. Probably Roger, good old straight, honest Roger, told him himself. I think that's what all those 'business conferences' were about—Roger was trying to negotiate something with Poe to protect us both from him. And once Roger was dead, Poe was next in line to inherit what he left me. Then after a year or so I knew Poe was dying of cancer, so no need to say anything at all about it."

"How did you know?"

"I just *knew*. You know I know things."

"Yes, I know. But the dream?"

"Well, Roger *came* to me to warn me."

"Not your own unconscious?"

"Possibly. Occam's Razor says it was Roger."

"Strange. I've always believed it *was* Roger."

"See? You're not hopeless, love."

We sat there silent for a couple of minutes. Her adored chubby hand on my knee was distracting me, so I picked it up and kissed it and held it. "That answers, excluding little details like who was the errand boy, all the questions but one. How did he do the spook tricks, like the mirror breaking and

the phone ringing?"

"He didn't, silly—I did."

"*You!* Why on earth?"

"Not why. Not consciously. Poltergeist effect. Physical and electromagnetic phenomena brought about by psychic means. Well demonstrated if not fully explained. Some playful or malicious spirit does psychokinetic effects with energy taken from somebody in the house. Most often a lustful and frustrated adolescent female."

I frowned as seriously as I could manage. "You mean I could have stopped the manifestations at any time?"

"I'm glad you didn't. If you had, just then, I wouldn't have proposed to you. The longer you made me wait, the more in love I fell with you."

"Well, in that case I'm glad, too."

"But we have to keep working to prevent a recurrence." Her smile at fifty-four is sexier than it was at nineteen. And, somehow, her high mileage, one hundred forty pound multipara bod more so than the one hundred ten pound virginal one. Life is full of mysteries, still.

"You're right." I began a careful, by now almost ritual, campaign of molestation.

UNSOLVED

by Walter Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

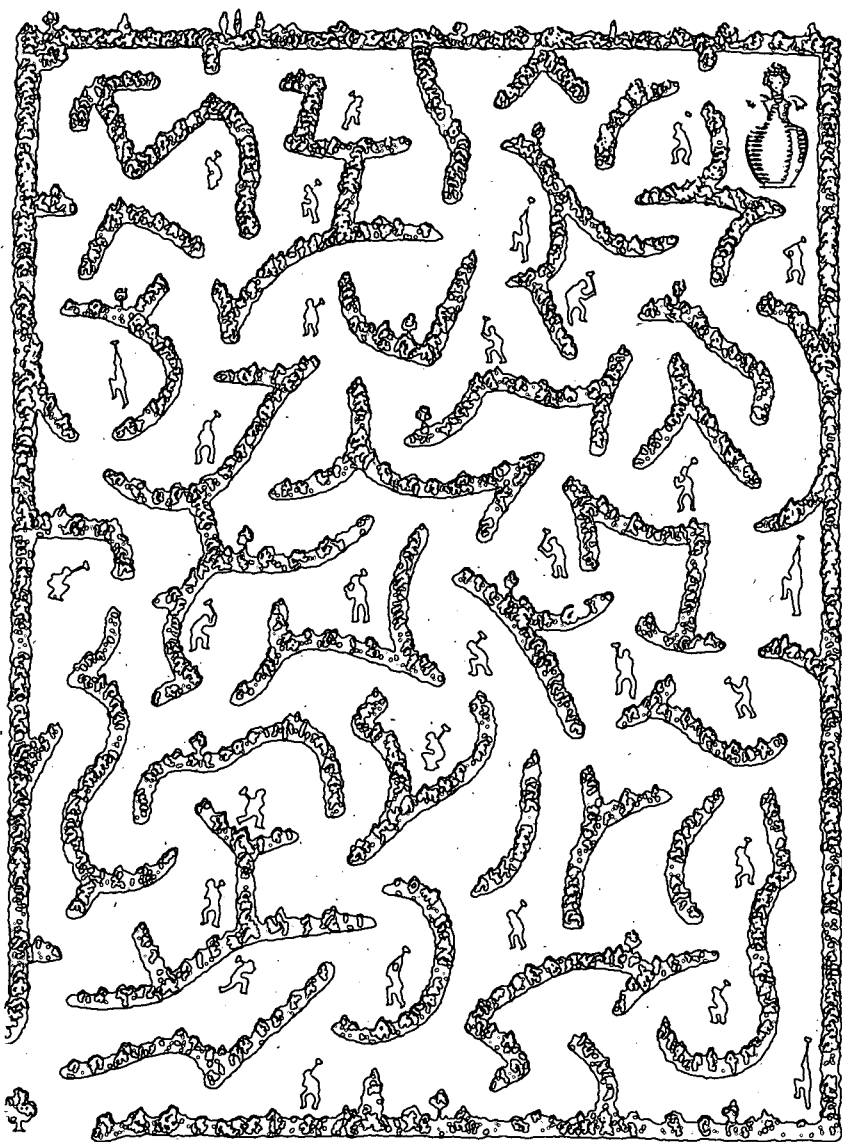
The answer will appear in the February issue.

Resolved to rescue the maiden in the pot of hot oil at the top right-hand corner of the diagram, Alley Barber fearlessly entered the secret maze of gangster Harry Al Rancid. He passed the tree at the bottom, on the left, but soon discovered that the maze was full of thugs armed with hammers. Giant though he was, Alley Barber had sufficient strength to tackle only two of them, and he actually managed to reach the maiden without meeting more than the prescribed couple.

See if you can find the way he went—but for goodness' sake, don't run into any danger.

See page 149 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

"Alley Barber and the Thirty Thugs." from MAZES AND LABYRINTHS: A BOOK OF PUZZLES by Walter Shepherd. © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., original book titled FOR AMAZEMENT ONLY, published by Penguin Books, Ltd., © 1942. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).



FICTION

The Case of the Relative Pronoun



by William G. Tapply

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Gus Harris flattened his shoulderblades against the water-streaked wallpaper and listened for a minute. Then he nodded to Souza a few doors down the hall. Souza flicked the wall switch, and a grimy darkness settled into the hallway. He eased himself into position on the side of the door opposite Harris.

"We all set?"

"I guess," muttered Harris. He slid a few steps away from the door and spoke softly into his police radio. "We're ready up here. We're going in." He clipped the radio onto his belt and moved back to the door. "I hate this part," he whispered. He cradled his S & W Chief's Special Stainless .38 in the palm of his right hand. "Let's get it over with."

Harris reached over and knocked loudly. "Open up, Poisson. Police officers." He pronounced the name the way a Brooklyn Dodger fan would say "person." Poy-son, with the accent on the first syllable.

"Poisson," whispered Souza, pronouncing it properly. "Jacques Poisson. How many times I gotta tell you? It means Jack Fish."

Harris grinned. "Whatever you say."

They heard a noise from inside, as if someone were push-

ing heavy furniture across the floor. Then there was a thump. Then silence.

"Jack Poy-son," shouted Harris. "We have a warrant for your arrest. Open up."

"Entrez. C'est pas fermé."

"What the hell does that mean?" said Harris.

"He invited us in, it's not locked."

"Oh, sure."

Harris nodded at Souza, who rolled his eyes in reply and reached out to touch the door-knob. It turned with a startlingly loud click, and the door swung inward a couple of inches. Souza pulled back his hand and pressed against the wall beside the door. Then came the shattering roar of a shotgun. The door slammed shut, its center suddenly punctured with a neat circular pattern of splintered holes the diameter of a beach ball. Chest high on a man. Harris and Souza pressed their backs against the wall on either side of the door.

"Sawed-off," said Harris. "Only way he'd get a pattern that wide."

"Man," said Souza. "Oh, man." He reached for the door-knob again, paused, and then, responding to some primeval cop's instinct, withdrew his hand an instant before the second shotgun blast tore through

the part of the door on which the knob was centered.

"You can't get out, Poy-son," yelled Harris. "You're surrounded by police officers. Put down the gun and come on out and you won't get hurt."

From inside came a growled syllable. Harris raised his eyebrows and Souza shrugged. "I didn't get it," he said.

"Me, neither," said Harris. "He don't sound too friendly."

"We gotta dig him out," said Souza. "I'm going in."

"I'll go."

Souza grinned. "Naw. My turn."

Harris locked eyes with his partner for a moment, then nodded. "Right. Your turn."

Souza held his revolver in both hands in front of his face. He stood back from the door, glanced at Harris, and in one smooth, practiced motion kicked open the door and rolled into the room while Harris fired three quick shots beyond his partner, all simultaneous with the boom of the shotgun.

Then Harris heard Souza's thin voice say, "Oh, God."

Harris rolled through the doorway and came up in a crouch. His revolver moved from side to side, seeking its target. His mind registered it all at once: the bearded man hunkered behind the upturned coffee table pointing the evil

cut-down weapon at him, a pump action shotgun, loaded with double-ought buckshot, probably, or maybe BB shot, and the big black eye at the end of the gun. It swung from Marty Souza's slumped body to stare at the center of Harris's chest.

Harris's gun jumped twice in his hand. The bearded man's eyes widened, and he seemed to shrug in bewilderment as the red stain spread across the front of his T-shirt. He was on his knees, tilting forward. The weight of his body pushed the coffee table away from him. The shotgun clattered to the floor. He groaned and then slowly collapsed onto his stomach.

Souza was slouched beside the door, his head and shoulders propped against the wall, his legs splayed out in front of him. He was gripping his right thigh with both hands, frowning at the puddle of blood that was spreading beneath him.

"Hey, man, you okay?" said Harris.

"I think it's bad," whispered Souza. "It doesn't hurt. No feeling. Oh God, Gus. I'm freezing. It's bad."

Harris grabbed the radio from his belt and yelled into it, "Get the hell up here! Marty's been hit! Call an ambulance! Hurry, for God's sake!"

From the radio came a voice. Harris said, "What? What are you saying?"

"Poisson," came the voice. "He there?"

"Yeah, he's here. Who the hell do you think got Marty? Poisson's hit. I don't know if he's alive. Move, willya?"

"Find out about the diamonds, Harris."

"Dammit!" exploded Harris. "Screw the diamonds. Marty's hit bad."

He threw the radio against the wall.

"He's right," rasped Souza. "See if Poisson's alive. The diamonds."

Harris went to where the bearded man lay on his belly. He grabbed his shoulder and roughly flopped him onto his back. Poisson moaned. His chest was awash with blood. His eyelids fluttered, then opened. Pale blue eyes stared unfocused at Harris.

"Where's the diamonds?" said Harris. He shook the man's shoulder. "What'd you do with the diamonds, you son-of-a-bitch?"

Poisson's mouth opened. He made a gagging sound in the back of his throat. A trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Harris got an arm under his shoulders and tried to wrestle him into a sitting position.

Poisson blinked at Harris. His lips moved.

Harris pushed his face close to the other man's. "The diamonds," he said. "What'd you do with the diamonds?"

Poisson's tongue flickered at his lips. "*Mon oncle*," he gasped.

"What? Huh?"

Poisson's eyes seemed to beg for understanding. "*Mon oncle . . . la boîte . . . qu'il porte.*" The words merged together, incomprehensible to Harris.

"Dammit," muttered the cop. Poisson's eyes had closed. Harris slapped his face sharply. "Speak English, willya? What're you trying to say, man?"

Poisson's eyes flickered open again. "*La boîte . . . d'm'oncle.*"

Harris felt life leave the man. He let go of him and the body thumped onto the floor. The cop went back to his partner, who had managed to hitch himself into a sitting position against the wall. The pool of blood under him seemed to be still growing.

"Hey, Marty," said Harris. "Hang on. I'll try to rig a tourniquet. Medics're on their way."

Souza's head lolled on his shoulder. His eyes were closed. His face looked gray. Harris reached down and felt for a pressure point in Souza's groin

above the wound. Under the bloodsoaked pants leg he could feel the place where the flesh had been blown away.

"His uncle's box," whispered Souza without opening his eyes.

"Shh. Don't try to talk."

"He said it's in the box that his uncle is carrying." Souza was talking in quick, shallow, hesitant gasps. "That's what he said. His uncle's got them in a box."

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Harris. He squeezed Souza's thigh with both hands. Then he looked around the room. "Where the Christ are they?" he muttered. Then he yelled, "Get the hell up here, you guys!"

Harris flipped open the leather case to show his shield. "Detective August Harris, ma'am," he said. "Boston police. Mrs. Therese Viennes?" Harris pronounced it "Vines."

The birdlike face peering through the cracked-open door nodded.

"Is your husband home, ma'am?"

Again the nod.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes," said the woman. "It's 'Viennes.'"

Harris shrugged. "I'm sorry. May I come in?"

The woman's face disappeared and the door closed. Harris heard the chain rattle, and then the door swung open. Harris stepped into a dimly lit hallway. An umbrella, a red plastic raincoat, and a man's felt hat hung on a hat tree beside the doorway.

"May I see your identification again, if you please," said the woman.

Harris liked the lilt in her voice. He held the leather case open.

She narrowed her eyes to peer at the shield. Then she shrugged. "How may I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to your husband, actually."

"It is not possible."

"I thought you said . . ."

"*Oui*. He is home. He will not talk to you."

"I can get a warrant, ma'am," he said gently.

"That will not help you, sir. My husband cannot speak. He had a stroke. A year ago Christmas. He is in a wheelchair. What is your business with him?"

"Christ, a wheelchair." Harris looked down at the woman. "Your nephew," he said. "Jack Poy-son."

"Poisson," said the woman, correcting him. "Jacques."

"Right. He was your nephew?"

"My nephew, yes. He is dead." She shrugged. "Jacques was an evil boy."

"Did he visit you? Sometime before he died, did he come here? Did you or your husband see him recently?"

Her shoulders twitched vaguely. "He came sometimes. We did not like to see him. But he was our nephew."

"How recently was he here?"

She shook her head. "I do not like to remember. Not long ago."

"Did he visit with your husband?"

She nodded. "He liked to talk with Guillaume. Neither of them speaks English. And my husband is unable to talk back. He did not like Jacques, either. But he could not talk back to him, could not tell him to go away. So Jacques, he would talk, and Guillaume, he had to listen. I did not listen. I did not want to be near him."

"I'd like to see your husband, ma'am."

"His health is not good. I do not think . . ." She turned her head to look into the interior of the house.

"Mrs. Ve—Vines," said Harris, mispronouncing the name again. "Your nephew shot my best friend, my partner. He's in very bad shape. He may not make it. He also murdered an old man so he could steal a lit-

tle bag of diamonds. He hit the man on the head several times with the butt of an automatic pistol. The man's skull was fractured, and he died. We would like to recover that man's diamonds. I think your nephew gave them to your husband."

The woman frowned and looked up into Harris's face. "The police killed Jacques, you know."

"That was me, ma'am. I killed him."

"I see," she said. She cocked her head, appraised Harris for a moment. Then she nodded once and said, "Why don't you come into the living room, detective."

Harris bowed his head and followed her through an archway into a small room cluttered with large pieces of furniture upholstered in dark floral prints. On one wall was a brightly colored picture of Jesus on the cross. A palm frond was stuck behind the frame.

Harris sat on the edge of a sofa opposite the woman, who perched on a big wingback chair like a child on a high throne.

"Tell me what it is you want," she said.

"The diamonds. Poy-son stole these diamonds worth over a million dollars, and we want to get them back."

"And you think we have them?"

"He said your husband has them."

She shook her head. "Guillaume has no diamonds."

"It's what Poy-son said. They were his dying words. That his uncle has the diamonds."

"Neither Guillaume nor I have seen any diamonds."

"Poy-son said—"

"What exactly did he say?"

Harris shrugged. "It was in French. I don't understand French. But Marty—my partner—he does. He translated. He said your husband has them in a box."

She stared at him for a moment. Then she stood up. "Follow me, then, please."

They went through a narrow passageway and stopped outside a closed door. The woman knocked softly. "*Guillaume*," she said. "*C'est un gendarme. Nous entrons.*"

He sat in a wheelchair, a shrunken little man staring at the silent flickering images on a small black and white television on a table. The shades were drawn, the bed unmade. The room seemed warm to Harris. The air was stale. It smelled of alcohol and perspiration.

The right side of the man's face seemed to hang slack, and his right arm lay limp, palm up

in his lap, the fingers clenched into a fist, clawlike. His right eye drooped. He turned his shoulders slowly toward Harris, looked at him without expression, then let his body return to its position facing the television.

Harris squatted on his heels beside the man. "I'm Detective August Harris, Mr. Vines. Your nephew shot my partner when we went to arrest him for the theft of some valuable diamonds and for the murder of the man who owned them. I am looking for those diamonds. Poy-son said you had them."

The man stared blankly at Harris, who turned his head to look up at the woman.

"He doesn't understand English," she said. She spoke quickly in French to her husband, who did not bother to look at her. When she was done, the man's left hand lifted, waved sideways, then fell back to his lap.

"No," said the woman. "That means no. He doesn't have any diamonds."

"Ask him if Jack ever mentioned diamonds to him?"

Again she spoke in rapid French, and again the man's left hand rose and fell.

"Look . . ." said Harris to the woman.

"He knows nothing."

"Anything," said Harris.

"Ask him if he knows anything about this. Anything. Poy-son might've said to him the last time he was here."

She shrugged and spoke again to the old man. His hand flipped once.

"Nothing," she said. "Please, now, please leave him alone."

Harris stood up slowly. "Okay." He followed her out of the dark bedroom and back through the living room to the front door.

The woman started to open the door, then turned to face Harris. "I am sorry," she said. "We know nothing. I would help you if I could. My nephew was a very bad man. Guillaume and I do not want any stolen diamonds. We want no trouble. We have trouble enough."

Harris listened to the musical lilt of her voice. Now she talks, he thought. Ain't it always the way? They can't help you out, or they won't help you out. But they sure as hell like to tell you their troubles. I found what I was looking for, and now that I just want to get the hell out of here, she decides to talk.

He was anxious to leave, but she stood in front of the door and the words poured forth. Harris smiled politely and listened.

"Jacques," she was saying, "was a taker. I don't mean just

a thief. Oh, he was a thief, even as a boy. But more than that, it was his nature to take from people." She reached out to touch Harris's jacket, as if she feared he might flee. "He took from all of us, whatever we had that he wanted. From all of us. From my husband and me, from my brother, even from my sister and her husband—his own parents, even. From all of us. And what did he give back to us?"

The diamonds, thought Harris. He gave you the diamonds. He remembered what he had seen in that dark bedroom.

She rambled on, and Harris's mind rode on the melody of her voice. They had come to the promise of work, she and her husband, her brother and sister and her sister's husband and her nephew. From France to America. The men found work, but then there was Guillaume's stroke, and then, just one week ago, her brother Paul had his heart attack, and now Jacques, the only one who deserved it, he had died, too.

Harris shifted from one leg to the other.

"And still," she said, "poor Paul, he cannot rest."

"I'm sorry," said Harris.

"It's a peaceful little cemetery," she said. "Just outside our city, on a hillside. You can smell the ocean from there. But

there's all the—how do you say it—”

“Red tape?” said Harris.

She smiled. “Yes. The red tape. Papers, customs. The embassy says it is trying. We just want poor Paul to get home so he can have his peace.”

“Perhaps I can help you,” said Harris.

“I did not mean that,” she said.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She smiled. “That would be good.”

He gestured to the door. “I want to thank you.”

“Yes,” she said. “You must get back to your work. I apologize for bothering you with our problems. You policemen, you have big problems.” She hesitated. “We have a saying,” she said. “In France, we say, *Il n’y a pas d’oncle d’Amerique.*” Do you understand?”

Harris shook his head and smiled. “I don’t understand your language.”

“It means, ‘There is no American uncle.’ There is no rich man in America who will come back to take you out of your poverty and your misery. You are born poor, your life is hard, and you die poor. No American uncle. It does not work that way. Do you see?”

“Yes,” said Harris. “I think so.”

But Uncle Guillaume had a

box full of diamonds. He had seen that, too.

“We all came to America,” continued the woman, “because we believed. We believed in the American uncle. Jacques, he always said he would be the American uncle for all of us. That is funny, no?”

“Yes,” said Harris. “That’s pretty funny.” She finally stepped aside and Harris gratefully reached for the doorknob.

“It’s just a quiet place on a hillside,” she whispered as he stepped past her. “All our family sleeps there.”

“I’ll see if there’s anything I can do.” Harris walked to his car, which was parked against the curb outside the row of run-down old houses. He slid into the front seat and flicked on the police radio. When he contacted the station, he said, “Get a warrant. Address: 32 Elmbrook in Somerville. Apartment 1. To confiscate and search a wheelchair.” He paused while this information was repeated back to him. Then he said, “There’s a little box built into the wheelchair, under the seat. That’s where the Grosvenor diamonds are.”

Harris rapped lightly on the glass and then pushed open the door. “You wanted to see me, captain?”

Captain Lawrence Neilson ran his fingers through his thick thatch of white hair. "Come on in, Gus. Have a seat."

Harris closed the door behind him and took the straight-backed chair opposite the captain's desk. Neilson rummaged among the heaps of papers in front of him and uncovered an ashtray. He picked up a half-smoked cigar, looked at it with distaste, stuck it into his mouth, and lit it. The room filled instantly with an odor that reminded Harris of burning plastic. Harris coughed into his fist.

"Now, Gus," said Neilson through a cloud of gray smoke, "what the hell were you thinking of?"

"Huh?"

"The wheelchair, Gus."

"Whaddya mean?"

"What made you think that poor old guy had the diamonds?"

"They didn't find anything?"

"No."

"They search the whole place?"

Neilson nodded.

"The woman, then," said Harris. "She must've hid them."

"No," said the captain. "She didn't."

"I would've sworn. Honest to God. Poy-son said his uncle had the diamonds in a box, I visit

the uncle, he's in a wheelchair, there's this box built into the chair so, hey." Harris flapped his hands. "It was like he said. The uncle had the box. It made sense. It all fit."

"You don't speak French, do you, Gus?"

"No, sir."

Neilson sat back and laced his fingers behind his neck. The cigar stuck out between his teeth. "Okay," he said. "Let's go over it again. Start at the beginning."

"You mean from the time Marty got shot?"

"Yes. And your visit to the aunt. All of it."

Harris began. When he tried to paraphrase Poisson's dying words, Neilson interrupted. "What *exactly* did he say, Gus?"

"Jeez, I couldn't really tell ya. It was in French."

"Try to remember. You're a cop. Use your training."

Harris shook his head slowly. "His mouth was full of blood, and he was having trouble breathing, you know? The words were all jumbled together, so I mean even if he was speaking English it would've been hard to understand. Martin seemed to get it, though."

"What did it sound like?"

Harris squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hear the syllables that Poisson spoke before he died. "*Mon oncle,*" he said.

Then he said, *'Dans la boite,'* and then some stuff I can't remember."

Neilson was grinning at Harris's efforts to pronounce the French.

"Did he say, *'Dans la boite que porte mon oncle'?*"

Harris shook his head. "It came out in phrases, not like a sentence. I mean, hey, the guy was practically dead, you know?"

"Or was it," persisted Neilson, "*'Dans la boite qui porte mon oncle'?*"

"What's the difference?"

Neilson sighed. "A big difference, Gus. Never mind. I'll talk with Souza about it."

"The guy was dying, captain. His words were all slurred. And Marty was in pretty bad shape, too. I guess he coulda got it all wrong. I don't know . . ."

"Forget it," said Neilson. "Was there anything else? Did they say anything to you, the two old folks?"

Harris shrugged. "Well, of course the old guy, he couldn't talk. Or at least he wouldn't. Not to me. The lady, she was complaining about her brother who died and they were having trouble shipping his body back to France. That was about all."

Neilson leaned forward. "Tell me everything, Gus."

Harris repeated his conversation with Therese Viennes.

Once Neilson interrupted to say, "It's 'Viennes,' Gus. You say, 'Vee-en.' Not 'Vines.'"

"You college guys," muttered Harris.

When he finished his recitation, Neilson stared at him for so long that Harris finally averted his eyes. Then the captain took the cigar from his mouth, pushed aside a stack of manila folders, squashed the butt in an ashtray, and nodded to him. "Okay, Gus. That's good. Good work."

"Yeah?" said Harris.

Neilson smiled. "Yeah."

As Harris left the office, he heard Neilson say into the telephone, "Get me somebody in French customs, willya?"

Harris and Souza sat at the bar downstairs at Durgin Park waiting for a table, Harris with his Old Grand-Dad and Souza nursing a Cutty on the rocks.

"So you're feeling okay, huh?" said Harris.

Souza nodded. "They're talking about disability. Screw them. I'm gonna be back. Lotta physical therapy, that's what it'll take."

Harris nodded. "Been missing you."

"Me, too."

They drank in silence. Then Harris looked up. "Okay," he

said. "Spill it. How did you guys figure it out?"

"The diamonds?"

"Well, yeah, the diamonds."

Souza grinned. "Well, the captain's the one who got it. He came by and we talked about it, and when he told me what he thought, I knew he was right. See, Poisson's parents *did* have an American uncle after all. Jacques himself. He was shipping the diamonds home in his Uncle Paul's coffin. That was the *boite* he was talking about. The box. It was Uncle Paul, not Uncle Guillaume Viennes. Uncle Paul's coffin was the box."

"Okay, okay," said Harris waving his hand impatiently. "I know they found the ice in the casket. But how in hell did you know?"

"Poisson told us."

"Wait a minute," said Harris. "I thought he said—"

"It was the relative pronoun."

Harris rolled his eyes. "Oh, sure."

"Look, Gus. Poisson said, '*Mon oncle. La boite qu'il porte.*' All jumbled together. It was that little *qu'* sound that

screwed me up. If he was trying to say *que*, then that would be the objective case. Object of the verb *porte*, right? Meaning the box which the uncle was carrying. Which is what I thought he meant. Like his uncle had this box. But if the *qu'* was supposed to be *qui*, that's the subjective case. Subject of the verb. 'Which carries.' See? Not the box my uncle is carrying, but the box which carries my uncle. Meaning, of course, the coffin. Simple, huh?"

"Simple," sighed Harris.

"It is, really. It all hinged on the case of the relative pronoun."

"Oh, sure," said Harris. He shook his head. "You college guys. The case of the relative pronoun. Sounds like something out of Perry Mason."

Souza grinned.

"And old Uncle Paul," said Harris, "the dead guy, he was the relative. Not Uncle Guillaume."

"You got it," said Souza.

"Ready for another, gentlemen?" said the bartender.

"You bet," said Harris. "And charge it to my American uncle here."

FICTION

Evening Callers

by Greg Goldsmith

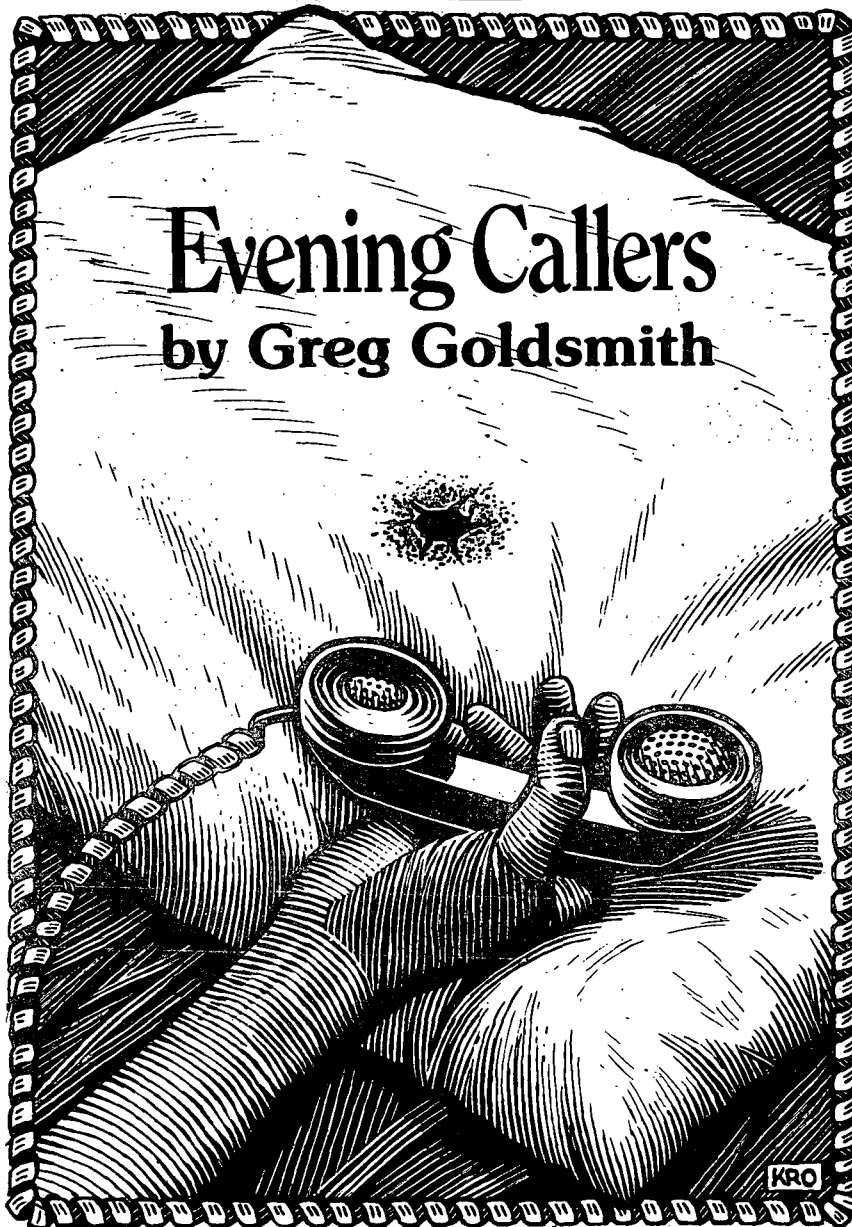


Illustration by Dan Krouatin

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The killer saw the gun on the motel room dresser, picked it up, and pointed it at the thief. The smirk disappeared from the thief's mouth, and words came tumbling out.

"Okay. Okay. I'll split with you. There's plenty for both of us. I was only kidding. I wouldn't leave you here empty-handed. We can go off together and set ourselves up in another town. Whaddya say?"

"Put the money in a pillowcase."

His hands trembling, the thief pulled the cover off one of the two pillows on his bed and started filling it with stacks of hundred dollar bills from his suitcase. He had taken about half the money out of the suitcase when he stopped.

"Okay. That's your half. Right?"

"The rest of it," the killer said, waving the gun from the suitcase to the pillowcase.

"Aw, c'mon," wailed the thief, obeying the order. "Leave me some."

The killer waited until the thief was finished.

"Put it on the table and lie facedown on the bed," said the killer.

The thief's eyes widened, then they narrowed, then he shook his head and did as he was told, burying his face in the remaining pillow.

"Now I want you to stay like that for ten minutes," said the killer, moving quietly toward the bed and picking up the naked pillow from the floor and wrapping it around the gun.

The muzzle of the pistol was about an inch from the thief's right temple when the killer pulled the trigger. The thief's head jerked crazily to the side, then snapped back. The bullet didn't go all the way through, so there was no splattering of blood. There was a heavy flow from the bullet hole, and it pooled on the pillowcase, then ran onto the sheet and soaked through into the mattress.

The killer put the gun in the thief's dead hand, inserting the index finger through the trigger guard. Picking up the money, the killer moved to the door, opened it a crack, and listened for noises in the hallway. After a few seconds the killer slipped out of the room, carrying the pillowcase in one hand and the pillow in the other. The door swung silently shut.

"S he killed a what?" I just had to hear him say it again.

Mark Vernon was on the other end of the line, and he didn't seem to think it was funny.

"She didn't kill anybody."

Lawyers talk that way for their clients, especially if they've been paid in advance.

"Okay. Who is it that she's accused of killing?"

"She hasn't been accused of killing anybody, Jess."

I was having a good time. I'd botched his straight line the first time, and I was determined to make him feed it to me again.

"Let me see if I've got this right," I said, leaning back in my office chair and crossing my feet on top of the desk. "She's hired you as her lawyer, and you want to hire me as the investigator, and she hasn't been accused of anything. Maybe you better give it to me again."

"Look, McBain," Vernon sighed. "We have reason to believe that she's going to be implicated in the death of her boss, a Mr. Mason Creel."

"And he was . . ."

"He ran a telemarketing operation."

My straight line.

"Aren't those the people who call at dinnertime to sell you aluminum siding and raffle tickets?"

"Yeah."

"So what's the problem? Killing those guys isn't against the law, is it?"

My funniest line of the day, and it bounced right off Ver-

non. "Do you want the case or not?" he growled.

"How much?"

"Well . . ."

"How much you get?"

"Her boyfriend put up a thousand dollar retainer, but he didn't know then what I know now."

"For half that, you got me for the next forty-eight hours."

"Swell."

"Tell you what. If it turns out she really did kill this guy, I'll give you a twenty-five percent discount."

"One hour. My office: Good-bye."

I liked Mark. He was snide, arrogant, and rude. He knew criminal law, and he knew how to move around a courtroom. It was a good combination for a defense lawyer. He was the guy I was going to hire the couple of times I almost needed one.

He had a storefront office two blocks from the courthouse, and at three o'clock that afternoon I was sunk in one corner of the couch in his inner office. Vernon sat at his desk, and our client was sunk in the other corner of the couch, her too-short skirt revealing most of the leg that she had folded over the top of the other.

She was attractive in a Kewpie doll sort of way. She had chosen blonde hair and excessive makeup, but she couldn't

cover up the fact that she was naturally pretty and not much more than twenty years old. Her eyes seemed permanently wide in amazement. I think many things amazed her. Her name was Tami with an "i."

"Now, Miss Winston," Mark told Tami, "please explain to Mr. McBain what you told me this morning."

"Well," she said with a great intake of breath, "I've been working for Mr. Creel for more than a month. I answered an ad in the newspaper and got a job as a telemarketeer."

She was obviously proud.

"We've got an office over on Walnut Street where Perkins Hardware used to be, and we sit around, about twenty of us, all afternoon and evening and call people in the phone book and try to get them to buy tickets to this show. It's being sponsored by the Caribou Lodge, but Mr. Creel was going to bring in the show people and rent the theater and everything. At least he was supposed to."

"And now he won't be?" I asked innocently.

"Well, no," she said, frowning at me. "He's dead."

"Please go ahead, Miss Winston," Mark sighed.

"He wasn't planning to put on a show anyway. He admitted that to me last night when

I pointed the gun at him, but some of us had pretty much figured it out anyway. One of the guys at the office found out that the owner of the theater didn't know anything about any show. And something else. The guy who owns the building where we work has been around twice this week wanting to know about the rent."

"Pointed a gun at him?" I asked.

"Yes," Tami said to the floor. "Last night in his motel room when I went to make him pay me. None of us have been paid, even though we're supposed to be paid every two weeks. A dollar a ticket for every one we sell and a minimum of a hundred dollars a week. And he kept running special contests for us. Like once or twice every night he'd yell that the next ticket sold would be worth five dollars or that anyone who sold five tickets in the next hour would get dinner for two at a nice restaurant."

"I don't suppose anybody got fed."

"No. And we didn't get paid, either. Like I said, we were supposed to get paid every two weeks, but after the first two weeks he said he had to hold back that paycheck for severance pay when we quit. That way, he said, we didn't have to give two weeks' notice if we

didn't want to and we'd still get paid two weeks later. It sounded all right when he explained it then, but last week was the fourth week we'd been working there, and we still hadn't been paid. I was owed nearly five hundred dollars. He said there'd been some kind of foul-up at the bank, and they couldn't get our checks to us for another week. But I was getting suspicious."

I glanced at Mark. He had his eyes closed.

"Anyway yesterday we told him we wanted our money or we were going to the police. He just laughed and said there was nothing to worry about, but he said it wouldn't look good on our employment records if he had to fire us. Then he left the office. I got mad. I told everybody that I was going to get paid that night, and I showed them my little gun—the one my boyfriend bought me for Christmas—and I said Mr. Creel better give me my money or else. I guess it wasn't a very smart thing to say when you think about it."

I nodded.

"So I knew he was staying at the Holiday Lodge, and I got the desk clerk to tell me which one was his room. Mr. Creel let me in and was being real nice to me until I told him I wanted my money. When he said the

checks would be ready in a couple of days, I told him I didn't think there were any checks or any show and that he was just taking the money and was going to run away without paying any of us. Then I showed him the gun. I had it tucked in the back of my jeans, you know, like they do on TV."

"What kind of gun?" I asked.

"A little one," she said, holding her hands about six inches apart. "The kind with a square handle."

"An automatic?"

"That's it. A .25 caliber automatic."

"Okay. What happened then?"

"It was so weird. He just laughed and put his hands up and said, sure, I could have my money. And he opened a suitcase, and inside was the most money I ever saw. That's when I noticed that all his suitcases were packed and there wasn't anything hanging up. You know? Like he was getting ready to leave town? Anyway, he pulled out a handful of the money, and it was hundred dollar bills. He said I was pretty smart to have figured him out, and I deserved double what he owed me for being so smart and for having the guts to face up to him. He asked me if I'd go with him and said we'd make a great team."

"What'd you say?"

She reddened.

"I didn't get a chance to answer. When he was handing me the money, I guess I was looking at it and not paying attention, and he knocked the gun out of my hand. Then he knocked me down and picked up the gun and said I was in big trouble for pulling a gun on him and that if I didn't do just what he said he'd have me put in jail. Then he told me to keep quiet, and he reached down and grabbed me by the blouse and pulled me up, and it tore. He pushed me down on the bed, but I rolled all the way across it and jumped up on the other side. He dived at me and tried to grab me again, but he fell across the bed, and I ran to the door and got out before he could get me, and I ran down the hallway and out the door and got in my car and drove away as fast as I could, and all the time I didn't know if he would shoot me."

"But he didn't shoot?"

"No."

"And you didn't shoot him?"

"Course not."

"I think we can jump ahead a little," Mark said, and pushed a newspaper across his desk to me. It was that morning's paper, and it was opened to page six. Mark had circled one of several small articles under the heading "Local Briefs."

MAN FOUND DEAD IN LOCAL MOTEL

A visiting businessman was found dead Wednesday night in his room at the Holiday Lodge. Police say he suffered a single gunshot wound to the head. They said they found the gun in the victim's hand, but they declined to speculate if the wound was self-inflicted.

The body was discovered by the motel night clerk, who was investigating a disturbance near the victim's room.

The victim's identity was being withheld pending notification of his family. He was reportedly working with the local Caribou Lodge on a fund-raising project. His hometown could not be immediately ascertained.

Coroner Sarah Harkins was to perform an autopsy today. She will issue a ruling in the death.

I tossed the paper back to Mark.

"And he used my gun," Tami said.

"How do you know that?" I said sharply.

It was supposed to shake her up. It failed.

"Because my boyfriend saw the gun and recognized it as mine."

She said it in a singsong, scolding tone that suggested the answer should have been obvious.

"Go ahead," I said.

"After I got away from Mr. Creel, I drove to my boyfriend's house and told him what happened. He got real mad, especially when I showed him my blouse. And he said he was going to kick Mr. Creel's behind, only he didn't say behind, and he left. He was gone a long time, and when he came back he said Mr. Creel had killed himself and that my gun was in his hand."

Mark interrupted.

"Mr. Boone—that's Miss Winston's boyfriend, Ted Boone—spoke with me this morning. He's the one who has retained me on Miss Winston's behalf. He said that when he got to the motel he was unable to rouse Mr. Creel and that he kicked the door down, thinking Creel might be hiding. Just as the door gave way, the night clerk showed up. They found Mr. Creel's body together. Here's a copy of the statement Mr. Boone gave to the police last night."

It was a standard police statement sheet with a Miranda warning at the top.

Boone had put his signature under the warning. Beneath that was typed:

I went to the motel because Mason Creel owed my girlfriend money because she had been working for him for more than a month and he hadn't paid her. Her name is Tami Winston. When he wouldn't open the door, I got mad and pounded on it and kicked it till the lock tore off the wall. Me and the man from the motel found the body together. I don't know why he killed himself. Sgt. Beech is typing this statement for me but these are my own words.

At the bottom of the page was Boone's signature and that of a Sergeant Michael Beech. Boone had drawn a big X beneath his statement, filling up the space between it and his signature, and put his initials in each corner of the X to show that he put it there.

Cops have been known to add a few lines to statements that they think are incomplete.

"The desk clerk verified Mr. Boone's story about their finding the body together, and the police did not detain him," Mark said. "He's convinced

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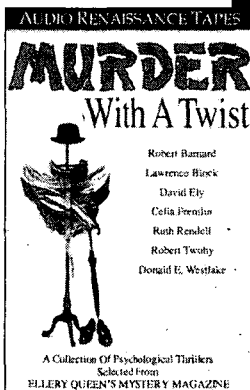
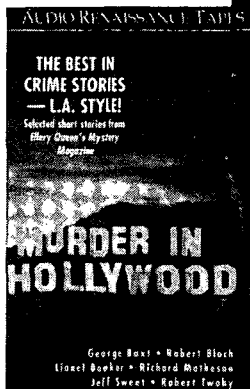
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that he's in the clear, but he was worried that Miss Winston's presence in the room might become known—especially since she made those unfortunate threats in front of her co-workers. He also realized that she had registered the gun and that it could be traced to her if police decided to do so. But he didn't know about this."

He handed me a copy of that afternoon's paper. It was open to page two and another story was circled.

CORONER BAFFLED BY TEST RESULT

Coroner Sarah Harkins said today that preliminary results of an autopsy she performed this morning do not back up police theories that the death of a man in a local motel Wednesday night was a suicide.

Harkins said that her examination indicated that the man, whom she would not identify, died of a single gunshot wound to the head. She said trace-metal tests performed on the victim's hand showed that he may have been holding the gun but also indicated that he had not fired it.

Police found the small-

caliber weapon in the victim's hand when they entered his room at the Holiday Lodge about 11:30 P.M. Wednesday. They said it had been fired recently and that one bullet was missing from the magazine. A shell casing was found on the bed, they said.

Harkins said she had not yet decided whether the death was an accident, a suicide, or a homicide, but said she was leaning toward the latter.

"I don't think he put on a glove, shot himself in the head, took off the glove, and threw it away before lying down on the bed with the gun in his hand," Harkins said. "And I don't think it likely that he was tossing the gun in the air, that it went off and then fell into his hand."

She said a slug she removed from the victim's head was of a size that indicated it could have come from the gun in his hand. She said firearms tests would be used to verify that. She also said she would await reports from tests on body tissues before issuing a finding.

Harkins said she was having difficulty finding

the man's family. His hometown was undetermined.

Police investigators could not be immediately reached for comment.

There have been frequent clashes between police and the coroner's office since Harkins' election two years ago. Police have called some of her techniques "science fiction theater" and were outraged two months ago when her testimony helped clear their only suspect in a homicide.

"What do you think?" Mark asked as I handed the paper back to him.

"If Sarah Harkins said the guy didn't shoot himself, he didn't shoot himself," I said. "You know it takes the cops around here an hour to figure out that their lunch break has been over for an hour."

"That's been my observation," he said quietly. "But as you can see, this puts my client in an uncomfortable position."

"But I don't understand," Tami said, near tears. "I told you I didn't have anything to do with him dying."

"Would you make the case, Jess."

"Okay," I said, turning to face my victim. "I'm the police.

I find your gun in a dead man's hand, only he didn't fire it. You were heard to threaten the dead man just before he was killed. Some of your friends at work made sure I found that out. You even showed them the gun you said you were going to use. I get a picture of you and show it to the desk clerk. 'Yeah,' he says. 'That's the chick who asked me which room Mr. Creel was in. Come to think of it I saw her run across the parking lot a few minutes later, jump in her car, and drive off like a bat out of hell.' I remember your boyfriend's statement and how you sent him out to the motel to get your money from Creel. Was he trying to help you? Or are you so coldblooded that you were willing to set him up for a murder charge? I'll figure out later if he's an almost-victim or an accessory to murder. In the meantime, I want you modeling a jail dress."

It was like whipping a puppy.

The longer I talked the wider Tami's eyes got and the lower her jaw dropped. When I finished, her face collapsed. She covered it with her hands and sobbed. Tears leaked through her fingers, and streaks of mascara dribbled down her wrists. Mark got up, came around his desk, and put a linen handkerchief in her hands. I realized

that he probably kept a supply in his desk.

"What the hell's going on in here?"

More than six feet of lean muscle and blazing black eyes pushed Mark's secretary out of the doorway and took a menacing step toward Mark, who was bending over his client. I managed to flop my way out of the couch and get between Mark and his new guest.

I don't take bodyguard assignments because I don't like being punched, and I figure anyone who takes on temporary help to catch punches knows that punches are going to be thrown. I take enough abuse as a sidelight to my usual work.

On the other fist, I do stay in reasonably good physical condition and am always ready to shift my attitude transmission to "mean."

I also have a natural snarl.

The guy had several inches and a few pounds on me, so it must have been the snarl that stopped him one step into the room. Before either of us could take a second step, the lawyer and his client stopped us. Mark stepped between us, holding his hands wide.

"Wait a minute, Jess. It's okay," he said.

Tami stopped blubbering long enough to head off my op-

ponent. "It's okay, Ted," she sobbed. "They're trying to help me."

Ted and I didn't quit scowling at each other, but we unbalanced our fists.

"Jeez," said Mark, moving back to his desk. "Jess, this is Ted Boone, he's paying us. Ted, this is Jess McBain. He's helping me keep you and Tami out of jail."

We both relaxed.

"Okay," Boone said, cautiously accepting the hand I offered him.

I sank back into my corner of the couch, and he took a seat in the middle. I lost my view of Tami's leg. It was probably for the best.

"I came down as soon as I heard they was calling it murder," Boone told Mark.

"As well you might," Mark said. "As Mr. McBain here just explained to Miss Winston, the police eventually are going to want to talk to her and you. They most certainly will seek charges against her, and they may well decide that you had a role. The two of you need to discuss whether you think I can represent both of you or if one of you wants to hire another lawyer to avoid conflicts in our defense strategy."

"In the meantime, I'm going to have Mr. McBain find out what he can. Thanks to politi-

cal conflict, we have a little time before the police admit to themselves that they need to do some work on the case, but I think that even they will have one or both of you in jail in the next couple of days. You should cooperate, but refuse to answer questions. If they arrest you, the only thing you should tell them is that you want to talk to me or to another lawyer."

That signaled the end of the meeting, and our clients got up and left the room. I stayed to work out a couple of details. While we were talking, Boone knocked softly on the door frame and leaned into the room.

"Tami and I've talked it over, and we think you can be the lawyer for both of us," he said.

"Okay," said Mark. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Boone said.

He turned, then stopped and nodded at me before he left. He was not smiling. Once blood gets hot, it doesn't cool quickly.

I headed straight for the cocktail lounge at the Holiday Lodge. I do some of my best work in bars. And make some of my worst decisions.

Creel had been staying at the motel for six weeks, and the bartender knew him well. I put

two ten dollar bills on the bar to pay for my two dollar beer, and I left my wallet open long enough for him to notice my license. I didn't tell him who I was working for.

"We're just trying to find out if it was really a murder like the papers are saying now," I told him. "Sometimes people kill themselves and try to make it look like an accident or something else."

"Why would... Oh, I get you," he said. "To fool the insurance company into paying. You working for the insurance company, huh?"

I smiled, and he took the two tens, ringing up two dollars on the cash register.

"Yeah. That guy hung around here a lot. He'd come in about nine o'clock and usually stay till closing. He hit on any stray women who came in. He settled on ol' Bedtime Burton for a while, but I think he dumped her a couple of days ago to shoot higher, if you know what I mean."

I said I knew what he meant. I asked about ol' Bedtime Burton.

"Penny Burton's her real name. Comes in six or seven just about every night. Hey, she's a little late tonight. Usually nurses a gin and tonic until she can find a salesman or something to finance her

drinks for the rest of the evening. Doesn't always go back to their rooms, but she sure did with that guy we're talking about. What's his name? Breed?"

"Creel. Mason Creel."

"Yeah. You know, I think she took it kind of hard."

"Did Creel talk to anyone else on a regular basis?"

"Well, the only one I can think of is that real estate guy. What's his name? Wait a minute. His picture's always in the paper."

He pulled a newspaper from under the bar, leafed through it, gave a snort of triumph, and shoved the paper at me, tapping his finger on a head and shoulders photo of a thin-faced, bespectacled man staring off into space. "Buying or Selling, Jim Miller is the man to see. Call Miller Realty at..."

I punched the number on the pay phone just outside the cocktail lounge. Miller's recorded voice informed me that he wasn't able to answer the phone but that he was ever so eager to get my message. When the machine beeped, I identified myself as Mr. McBain from the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. I said I had important news for him and he should contact me immediately. I had recited about half of the toll-free number of a cor-

respondence school that taught computer programming when he picked up the phone.

"This is Jim Miller," he said in a voice split between excitement and wariness.

"This is Jess McBain. I'm an investigator looking into the circumstances of the death of a Mr. Mason Creel. I understand that you knew Mr. Creel."

"But you..."

Annoyance and disappointment. Then he chuckled.

"Okay. A pretty smart trick. You working for the insurance company, huh? Well, yeah, I knew Mason Creel. But just for a couple of months and only through the lodge. I'm treasurer of the Caribou Lodge and worked with him on the fundraiser. Terrible thing, him killing himself."

"Yeah," I said. Miller apparently hadn't read the afternoon paper. "Tell me about this fundraising deal."

"Oh boy. I hope you're not taking this to the newspapers. It's real embarrassing for the lodge."

I told him I had no use for newspapers.

"Okay. Good. Well, as best as I can tell, he was taking money for himself, but he wasn't paying the phone workers. Some of them called the head of the lodge a couple of days ago to complain, and when I saw that

Mr. Creel killed himself, I decided I'd better get an accounting for the lodge of the checking account we had set up."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, what we had agreed was that the money from the ticket sales would be put in the account, and he could write checks for things like rent and salaries for the workers and the cost of putting on the show. When everything was paid for, we were supposed to split what was left fifty-fifty. When I got to the bank this morning, I found out that the only checks he had written were to himself. Something over five thousand dollars."

"Why hadn't you noticed this before?"

Instant whine.

"Wait a minute. It's not my fault. We just got our first statement from the bank two weeks ago, and it was after that that he started writing the checks. I called every few days to see what the balance was, but I couldn't tell from that what he was doing. It's going to be real embarrassing for the lodge anyway. We've got several thousand tickets sold, and as best as I know, we don't have any show to give. Besides, those phone workers are going to be after us."

"Several thousand tickets?"

"Yeah."

"At five bucks a pop?"

"Yeah. You know when you think about it, it's kind of funny that he would kill himself now. There's a little over twenty-five thousand still in the account. He could have paid the workers and paid for some kind of show and still put in a claim for maybe ten grand. We'd have believed him. Everything he said seemed so reasonable at the time."

I'd heard the same thing from Tami Winston. Either Creel was a real artist or he carried some disease that made people dumb.

"If it makes any more sense to you," I told Miller, "there seems to be some question of whether he did kill himself."

"You mean . . . murder?"

"Yep."

"Wow. Hey, that wouldn't be good for your company, would it? It'd be better for you if it was suicide."

"Yes," I agreed. "It would be better for my client if Creel had killed himself."

After I hung up, I went back to the bar and ordered another beer. The bartender served it, then stood in front of me so long that I realized he expected more money. I fished out another ten. He sucked it up greedily, then jerked his head toward the end of the bar. "Bed-time Burton," he said.

Every cocktail lounge in the world has a Penny Burton occupying a stool at the smokiest end of its padded bar. Her legs were long, her hair was short, and her age was middle. She probably had never been pretty, but she knew how to dress and apply the cosmetics that would make her attractive in a dim light and boozy atmosphere.

Her eyes betrayed nothing about what she was feeling until she started drinking. Then they'd either widen and flutter for an evening of "everything's-funny," or they'd narrow and harden for "I-hate-the-world-and-the-world-hates-me."

She didn't consider herself a prostitute. She just accepted favors when they were offered by her short-term friends.

If they didn't offer, she would hint.

She wasn't nursing her drinks that evening. Her glass was nearly full when the bartender pointed her out, but in less than five minutes she was ready for a refill.

"Can I get this one for you?" I asked, sliding onto the bar stool next to her and signaling to the bartender.

"I can pay for my own," she said coolly, trying not to slur her words.

She gave the bartender a signal of her own and turned half

away from me. It was not the reaction I had been led to expect.

"I didn't mean to insult you," I said. "I can tell by looking at you that you've got too much class to need my help to buy a drink. I was just trying to be sociable."

"I know what you were trying," she said, and then she half smiled as if she had just thought of something. "Tell you what. I'll buy you a drink."

The thought really amused her, and she gave a tippy giggle. My ten dollar beer was still at the other end of the bar, so when the bartender delivered Burton's gin and tonic, I ordered a Glenlivet. Burton glared at me for a split second, but she fished a ten out of her purse to pay for both drinks. She got a couple of dollars change. She didn't know how lucky she was.

"You're kind of short, aren't you," she said, eyeing me up and down as if I were a coat she was considering buying.

"Well, my hair is only five feet nine inches off the ground, so I didn't have to be any taller," I told her. Then I took a chance. "Besides, I'm at least as tall as my only rival for your attention."

"Huh?"

"Oh, I was in here last week and you were with some guy.

Hey, he's not your husband, is he?"

The smile was gone as she stared at the bar for a moment and shook her head. Then she stared hard at me.

"No, he's not my husband, Mr. . . ."

"Jess McBain."

"No, Mr. Jess McBain, he's not my husband. In fact he's not anything any more. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Killed himself," she said, the half smile back on her face. "Or so they say."

"Hey, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He turned out to be a bum, and besides, he didn't do anything good for me while he was alive." She laughed. "In fact it wasn't until he was dead . . ."

She stopped talking and went back to her drink.

"A secret?" I said.

"Let's just say I was thinking of some pillow talk." She giggled again. "Yeah, some pillow talk that's paying off."

She finished her drink, so I downed mine and offered to buy another round.

"Naw," she said. "I think I'd better just get myself back to my apartment. I don't think I should be drinking too much in public just now."

She turned on her stool and leaned toward me until our

faces were less than a foot apart. My mind raced, trying to come up with a line to disconnect this relationship without getting ugly.

"You know," she whispered to me, "I don't think I'll ever date another man who isn't tall. 'Night."

She slid carefully off the stool, steadied herself, then hip-swayed out of the lounge, staggering only slightly when she went down the ramp to the motel lobby.

At ten thirty the next morning, Tami Winston was arrested for the murder of Mason Creel. Vernon gave me the news about forty-five minutes later, and we agreed that it was at least twenty-four hours early for the police. Somebody had shoved them through the gun-tracing and witness-hunting that put them on our client's doorstep.

"Kate Irwin from Sarah Harkins," I predicted.

Irwin was the prosecutor, and she was smart enough to take notice of a red flag from the coroner. Besides, she enjoyed putting the spurs to the local police.

"Tami's doing just like I told her, keeping her mouth shut," Vernon said. "I'm on my way to the jail now to see her. I'm out

in the open now. Any reason to keep quiet about you?"

"Naw. In fact, if I'm right about this being a prosecutor's office case, it'd help me if you let Jack Blanchard know that I'm working this side of the street. He and Kate usually let me see what they've got without jumping through all the legal hoops."

Blanchard was chief criminal investigator for the prosecutor's office. He was a retired police detective, and as such he didn't take quite the delight his boss did in cop-baiting. He did his job, though, and he did it the way his boss demanded: clean and efficient.

Late that afternoon I was sitting in front of his desk looking at the contents of a folder marked "T. Winston/M. Creel."

Blanchard's case file was mainly photographs of the motel room, reports from policemen, and statements from witnesses. There was also a preliminary report from the coroner's office. While I leafed through it, Blanchard studied some stuff just off the office fax machine.

"We gotta change one of the names on that folder," Blanchard said, waving his papers. "The victim's real name is Homer Finch. Fingerprints show he's been arrested at least a dozen times, four convictions

and two short prison terms."

"What's he done?"

"Same as here. Con games. Here's a good one. In Cleveland in 1979 he put down a thousand dollars for deposit and one month's rent on a house. Then he rented it to at least thirty-seven people. Every one of them paid him a three hundred dollar deposit and three hundred for the first month's rent. They were all supposed to move in the same day. He stuck around too long, though, and a couple of the people who had rented it ran into each other about a week before moving day. That's one of his convictions, and eighteen months of his prison experience. He's also run the standard pigeon drops and long-lost heir schemes. We'll probably hear about a lot more telephone sales scams that he got away with."

I went back to the case file. There were a couple of surprises in the reports. For one thing there was no mention of any great wads of money like Tami said she had seen. The contents of Creel's pockets and wallet came to less than two hundred dollars.

Ted Boone, who apparently had decided that his lawyer had misinformed him about what he should do if questioned, had given another statement to police. What was

in the file was Blanchard's account of a conversation he had with Boone about thirty minutes before he arrested Tami. It was in that awful language police use when forced to write something down.

"This unit advised subject Boone that his girlfriend is suspected of killing victim Creel. Subject became hostile at first, then admitted to this unit that he had not told the whole truth in his original witness statement. Subject admitted that he recognized the gun to be that of suspect Winston. Also admitted that the real reason he had pounded on victim's door on the night of the incident was because he believed victim had torn suspect's blouse nearly off."

There was also a statement from the motel desk clerk, My warning that he would remember her came true. And he really did see her running away.

Then there was the motel maid's complaint.

"What's this about a missing pillow?" I asked.

"That's what may get your client one of our more exclusive homicide charges instead of some sort of manslaughter. The way we see it, she got gypped, so she got mean. She pulled the gun on the guy, then wrapped a pillow around it to muffle the sound when she plugged him in

the temple. The pillow got burned by the muzzle blast, so she dumped it somewhere. The autopsy turned up some linen shreds around the wound. She's a little more coldblooded than what she told you, huh?"

I didn't say anything. I left Blanchard's office without telling him what I thought I knew. I drove home. At six o'clock I left the house, taking along my .38 revolver and holster. They seemed like good companions for hunting money.

Money that wasn't there.

Money that nobody said was missing.

Money that comes from pillow talk.

I waited an hour at the Holiday Lodge bar, but Bedtime Burton didn't show. The bartender gave me her address. It was only a few blocks from the motel.

Burton lived on the second floor of a two story, eight unit apartment building. The doors to the four upper apartments were along a balcony that ran the length of the building. Burton's door was second from the end.

I was about to knock when I heard a man's voice from inside. Even with my ear to the door, I couldn't make out the words or recognize the voice. A few feet from the door was a window. It was one of those

that slide sideways, and it was open. The porch was dark, there was no one around, and it didn't take much burglar skill to pry the screen out and pull myself into Bedtime Burton's bedroom.

The bed was unmade, there were clothes strewn around, and there was a suitcase on the dresser. The door was closed, and when I put my ear against it, I heard Burton say, "I'll get it. It's in the bedroom."

Under the bed is ridiculous, and behind the door is an invitation to a broken nose. I jumped through the open closet door and pulled a long dress in front of me, hoping that whatever she was after wasn't in the closet.

I watched her come into the room and walk straight to the bed. She took one of the two pillows off the bed, removed the pillowcase, and walked out. She almost stepped on the window screen that I had left near the bed, but she was humming and hugging the pillow and didn't notice the new ingredient in her bedroom stew.

She left the door half open, and I crept to where I could see into the next room. Burton's back was to me, and she had put the pillow on a glass-topped table between her tiny kitchen and her tiny living room. There were four stacks of currency on

the table. Sitting behind the money was a man I'd never met.

I'd seen his picture in the paper, though, and I'd talked to him on the phone.

"Hello, Miller," I said, stepping into the room. "Buying some real estate?"

It was one of those moments when anything could have happened. I had hoped to scare them into a freeze, but I hadn't pulled my gun because I didn't want to panic anyone into doing something wild.

It pretty much worked. Burton gave a little squeal, spinning toward me and jumping in the air a couple of inches at the same time. Miller came half out of his chair and grunted something I didn't make out.

Then it was time for the gun.

"Let's all stay calm so nobody gets hurt," I said, pulling the revolver, but not pointing it at anyone in particular.

"You," Burton hissed. She was not happy to see me.

"Who the hell..." Miller said, slowly coming all the way to his feet.

"Jess McBain," I said with a half bow. "We've spoken on the phone, but we've never been formally introduced."

I was pretty proud of myself, and I was showing off. I had forgotten why I had a gun in my hand. There was a killer in the

room, and I was acting like a clown.

"That's a pretty good payoff," I said, waving the gun at the money. "How much is she charging you for one slightly burned pillow?"

"There's ten thousand dollars there," he said, taking a step back from the table. I thought it was a gesture of offering.

"Ten thousand's a real bargain for what you're buying," I told him. "You get away with murder even after you were dumb enough to let her see you dumping the evidence where she could get it. Say, Penny, how'd you figure out that pillow was worth something?"

"I was on my way to Mason's room—I don't know why—when I saw Mr. Miller here leaving in a hurry. I hid and watched him throw the pillow in a dumpster in the parking lot, then I let myself into Mason's room with the key I got while we were . . . seeing each other. When I saw what was in there, I got scared and ran out. But by the time I got to my car I figured out what was going on. When no sirens or anything came after a few minutes, I got out of my car and got the pillow out of the dumpster."

She looked older every second. She had been staring at the floor, then she glanced at me, at Miller, at the money on

the table, then back at me. She was starving, and she thought I was going to eat the meal that Miller had spread on her table.

"Look, McBain," she said. "You get what you want from him. This money is mine, and you can't have it. Nobody's going to get hurt if we do this right."

"I've got a client who could get hurt pretty badly," I said.

"An insurance company? Come on, McBain," Miller said, moving a couple of steps toward me. "Listen, I can come up with another ten thousand for you and still get out of here with almost that much myself. That way everybody makes out."

"Well, there's poor old Homer Finch," I said. "He doesn't come out too well."

Burton frowned, but Miller grabbed the bait.

"He was a pig, and he deserved what he got," Miller said, gesturing wildly as he took another step toward me. "I just lost my temper when I realized he was trying to rip off the club and me and everybody else."

"How did you know Homer Finch?" I asked the man who said his name was James Miller.

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. After a second or two he closed it and stared at the floor.

At that point I was really feeling pleased with myself. Burton was slumped against the wall trying to figure out what we were talking about, and Miller was standing a few feet in front of me with his arms crossed and his head down.

I was about to give Burton the mandatory brilliant detective monologue to show her how cleverly I had trapped Miller into admitting he knew that entertainment promoter Mason Creel was really con man Homer Finch.

It was then that Miller uncrossed his arms and sprang at me. There was something shiny in his right hand. I tried to bring the gun around on him. I didn't quite make it, but I did get my arm in the way.

It was a hunting knife with a six-inch blade, though at the time it looked like a machete. The point went inside my coat sleeve and skidded along my forearm, ripping open a foot-long gash. My revolver fell to the floor.

Miller's knife and right hand were snagged in my sleeve, and his momentum sent him staggering past me on my right. I pivoted with him and looped a left hook onto his ear. His glasses fell off, and he went to one knee. He let go of the knife, and it fell out of my sleeve and

joined my gun and his glasses somewhere on the floor.

I couldn't get my right hand to do anything helpful, so I brought my knee up into his chin. That hurt both of us, but at least it knocked him over backwards and left him dazed, sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall. I took a limping step backwards and looked around for my gun.

Penny Burton showed it to me. At least she showed me the dark hole where the bullets come out.

"Now, just hold it," she said, her voice cracking too badly to rise to the shriek it should have been. "You're out of this, McBain. Miller and I have a business deal, and you're not going to butt in on it."

Her eyes bulged and glistened with tears. She held the gun in two shaky hands as she backed toward the table and the money.

"It won't buy you anything but trouble," I told her. "Kill me and you're a murderer just like him."

The idea seemed to knock some of the hysteria out of her.

"I'm not going to kill you," she said incredulously. "I just want you to stay out of my way."

"We might have to kill him, honey."

It was the man we knew as

Miller. He got shakily to his feet and leaned against the wall. He glanced around the floor until he located his glasses. He moved to get them.

"Wait a minute," Burton said. "I'm not going to be any part of a murder."

"You already are," Miller said, putting on his glasses and looking around the floor again. "When you decided to blackmail me instead of turn me in, you became part of one murder. Not that I blame you. Like you said, this is just a business deal between us."

"People who make deals with him come to bad ends," I told Burton as calmly as I could. "Why do you suppose he brought the knife with him?"

Burton frowned, trying to make the pieces fit into a clear thought. Miller found the knife and picked it up. I talked faster.

"He didn't know I was going to be here, Penny. The knife was for you. What was it supposed to look like this time, Miller? Not another suicide surely. Probably a slasher rapist. Maybe the police wouldn't make a connection."

Miller took a step toward me, and I decided that I'd have to take a chance on Burton, hoping she wouldn't shoot me when I tackled him. It didn't work out that way. When I spun to meet Miller, my knee

gave way beneath me, and I sprawled onto the floor about where I thought his feet would be.

He wasn't there. He had lunged past me toward Burton, the knife in his hand and even with her waist.

The gunshot was deafening in that little apartment. I couldn't keep from closing my eyes and pulling my chin into my chest, so I didn't see Miller take the slug in his chest. I looked up in time to see him fall across the table and into the stacks of money. Hundred-dollar bills flew like neatly piled leaves suddenly scattered by playful children. The table collapsed beneath him, and he lay facedown on a pile of bent chrome and broken glass and gory paper. The term "blood money" came to mind.

I rose painfully to face Burton, not knowing what to expect. She was holding my smoking gun in both hands and staring wide-eyed at the mess on the floor. She turned and looked at me as though she had forgotten I was there. She took the four steps to where I was standing and handed me the gun. I put an arm over her shoulder and let her slump against me.

She really wasn't any taller than me.

*

"His real name was Pete Moon," Prosecutor Kate Irwin told her audience in Mark Vernon's law office. "Jack Blanchard says the FBI is starting to complain about how much time they're spending tracing fingerprints from corpses he comes up with, but this one was easy. Moon did three years for a jewel store robbery in some little town in Ohio. He served his time at the Mansfield Reformatory, and it turns out that one of his cellmates was Homer Finch. That's Mason Creel to you people."

Mark and I nodded. Tami Winston looked puzzled as usual.

"It looks like Finch was probably blackmailing Moon into helping him pull off the scam with the Caribou Lodge," Irwin said. "There's no evidence that he did anything illegal since he moved here seven years ago, and the bank records show he put the money back in the bank after he killed Finch. It wasn't until Penny Burton got in touch with him that he took it

out again. He apparently had decided to kill the witness and hit the road with the money."

"Yeah," I said. "He could have been set up pretty well in another state by the time the cops here got their scorecards added up."

Irwin kept her mouth shut, but it was bent in a half smile.

"What about that Burton woman?" asked Tami Winston.

"Mr. McBain here talked to me about her," Irwin said. "He told me he'd have a hard time testifying against someone who'd saved his life. I agreed that I'd have a hard time prosecuting someone who saved his life—at least until we can get that made illegal."

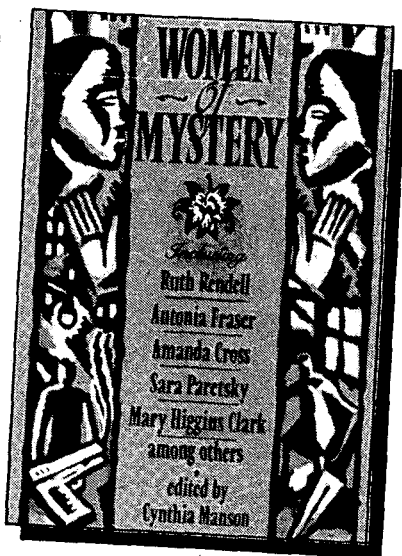
That got a chuckle from Vernon. Tami was looking at her watch.

"Oh, I gotta go," she said. "I've got a job audition at the Pritchard Motel."

"Telemarketing?" I sighed.

"Hah. Never again," she sniffed. "Modeling. This photographer I met says I can make big money in lingerie."

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FICTION



The Inn of the Sleeping Dragon

by Martin
Limon

Holding the thimblelike cup in two hands, Meng Li saluted the company.

"Breathe wisdom, oh little cup, into this humble one's addled brain."

After he tossed back the fiery rice wine, the master of the troupe of musicians poured him a refill.

"You are too modest, Poet," he said. "It is widely known that you have one of the greatest minds in all of China."

"Ah. But it is a mind devised for whim and foolishness, not for so demanding an exercise as yours, the harmonizing of strings and flutes."

The musician bowed at the compliment and ordered another flask of wine from the rotund wife of the innkeeper.

Outside the half open windows, jagged peaks rose through drifting gray clouds.

Meng Li had started his journey a week ago, after leaving his patron of six months, the Provincial Governor of Henan, to move to a new position as the poet-in-residence for the Prefect of Hubei. He enjoyed travel. Primarily for its effect on his poetry—the new people he would meet, the new places he would see. But he had barely reached this Inn of the Sleeping Dragon before the snows started falling and he had found that he could go no farther until the mountain passes were cleared. Many of his fellow guests at the inn were artists and entertainers, like himself, traveling from one city to another. Despite the weather conditions there was plenty of wine at the inn and plenty of food, but something bothered Meng Li. His liquor-fogged brain searched for the reason.

It was the Chief of the Acrobats, long lost to the joys of subtlety, who mentioned the discordant note.

"Pay no attention to the sighing maiden," he said. "She's been grieving for two days now."

"Grieving? Amidst beauty like this? For what?"

"The necromancer says the snow will break tomorrow. The guides will take their ponies down to the base of the Moonglow Precipice and retrieve the body of artist Liang Wun-kai."

"The body? How was the man killed?"

"Carelessness, I fear. You see, he was an artist."

"Oh, but that hardly explains the situation, my friend. Artists are the most meticulous people on earth."

"Maybe when it comes to their paper and ink. But not when they are climbing mountains. He must've imbibed too heavily of the

mountain's inspiration, or maybe he misjudged the slipperiness of the rocks near the precipice. But nevertheless he fell to his death, amongst the boulders that border the Stream of Heavenly Petulance."

"The Stream of Heavenly Petulance? Certainly the folks hereabouts believe in fancy names for their creeks and tributaries?"

"Oh yes. The people of the Dabie Mountains are full of poetic expression." The old acrobat waved his arms. "As are these mountains with streams and falling snow."

Meng Li drank a few more cups and pondered the death of an artist amidst such beauty.

That night Meng Li tried to read, as he had a thousand times, the writings of Li Po, the greatest poet in the history of the world. But the restless creaking of the wooden floorboards of the inn was too much for him. He put his book aside, lay down on his bed, and tried to sleep.

Footsteps and a soft rapping woke him.

The woman who entered was small but sturdy looking. She wore red trousers with a matching red blouse, both elaborately embroidered with gold thread. As she bowed, Meng Li noted a small black bun of hair pulled tightly behind her head. She introduced herself as Xiao Lan, the small orchid.

"Great poet, you must help me," she said.

She didn't rise but kept her head bowed.

"Aah. Yes. But what can a poor poet such as myself do to help anyone?"

"You must help me discover who killed the artist, Liang Wunkai."

"Killed him? But I thought it was an accident."

"No. I am sure of it. Someone killed him."

"How do you know?"

"I feel it. That's all."

"Even if he was killed, certainly that is work for the magistrate."

"But he will not come until the snows have melted. By then all the vagabonds and wandering minstrels who have made their temporary nests here will be gone. You must help this poor woman. Now."

"The man was not married, I'm told. To have such a great interest in him then, you must be his sister, or at least a close cousin."

The girl blushed. "No, sir. I am but a humble acrobat, of no relation to Artist Liang."

"Then what is your interest in him?"

"It is more correct, perhaps, to say," she said, "that he had an interest in me."

"Aah." Meng Li nodded. Even a poet has some sense of the pull between men and women when stranded in a lonely outpost.

"But what could I do for you?" he said. "By all reports it was nothing but an accident."

"It was no accident. People here hate him, and they're glad to see him dead."

"Who?"

"All of them. You are a great man, you can ask questions. A humble woman like myself cannot. Just talk to them. Their lies and perfidies will become apparent soon enough."

"And through these questions I will bring a killer to justice?"

"If anyone can, you can."

Meng Li thought of the writing that awaited him when he got to the court of the Prefect of Hubei. Spontaneous poems at the dinner table, witty aphorisms while strolling through the garden, readings for the Prefect's family at night. Such was the life of the court poet, and it became more trying each year. What rich material for his work must exist in the depraved minds of the mendicants huddled here at the Inn of the Sleeping Dragon.

Meng Li turned to the girl slowly.

"I will take on your case," he said, "but first you must show me some of your acrobatic tricks."

The girl's body was as neat and as compact as a well-tied knot, and despite his years of soft living and his preference for a sophisticated brand of decadence, Meng Li was soon climbing the rafters with the girl, giggling as gleefully as a monkey in a tree.

The next morning Meng Li tightened his leggings over his trousers and his foot wrappings. Outside the inn four peasants waited for him with a cart and a horse.

Snow fell lightly as the oldest of the guides led them from one level of the canyon to another until they stood on the floor of the valley.

"It's not far now," the old man said. "Maybe three *li* upstream, at the foot of the Moonglow Precipice."

The body of artist Liang Wun-kai lay twisted and puffed, as if some mischievous child had decided to torment a doll that had fallen out of favor.

Meng Li held his breath as he inspected the body.

"His purse is still intact. A few *kuai* only." Typical of an incontinent artist, he thought.

"There seems to be no sign of struggle. His robes remain intact."

Meng Li might as well have been talking to himself. The peasants showed no interest.

A scroll of paper lay nearby, unraveled like a banner across the boulders. It appeared that some work had been started but not finished. Meng Li found a brush, the flat squat kind used by artists, and a shattered ink stone, its dark contents splashed like leopard spots against a rock.

The old guide helped Meng Li search through the man's clothes. Finally Meng Li stood up:

"No note. No final poem of regret for an unrequited love. No sign of struggle. Maybe the man threw himself off the cliff for reasons we will never know. Reasons vast and empty yet full of wonder, like the universe itself."

The peasants stared blankly. The old guide cocked his head. Meng Li continued.

"Or maybe the young acrobat is right. Maybe he was pushed."

During the long climb back to the inn, Meng Li wondered about the paper and the brush and the ink.

Exhausted after the long trip, he ate quickly and went straight to bed.

The next morning Meng Li got up early and went to the kitchen to talk to the innkeeper. He was an old wizened man, who seemed frail and sticklike, especially when he stood next to his robust wife, who presided over his labors like an unforgiving Buddha.

"These snows are good for business," the innkeeper said, "but they can also bring us much trouble. If we have one or two troublemakers . . . well, sir, you see what devastation can result."

The old man shook his head as he pulled out another pan, clanging it down on the edge of the stone stove.

"A suicide. What a disgrace for the Inn of the Sleeping Dragon."

"Maybe it wasn't a suicide," Meng Li said. "Maybe somebody killed him."

The innkeeper dropped his pan and the huge pair of chopsticks that he used for stir-frying. As they clattered to the floor a voice bellowed from the dining hall.

"Concentrate on your work, oh wizened one. Your clumsiness has lost us enough money this year."

Beneath his breath the old man cursed his wife and picked up the scattered utensils.

"You have many guests here now," Meng Li said. "Did any of these people quarrel with the artist, Liang Wun-kai?"

"Oh, no. My wife wouldn't put up with that. She watches everything. And everyone."

"Surely he must have caused some sort of friction?"

"Well, as to friction, I wouldn't know about that. But I do know about the young acrobat. He seemed quite concerned with teaching her about the flowering of plants and the migrations of birds."

"They took walks together?"

"Yes. Many."

"This must've made some of the other men jealous."

"It made all the men jealous."

The grating voice of the innkeeper's wife reverberated through the kitchen.

"I hear no chopping, worthy husband. Our guests will be demanding their breakfast in a few minutes. Let us not disappoint them."

The old man picked up a cleaver and, like a blur, sliced a squash into a thousand tiny slivers.

"Yes," he said. "All the men were jealous. Except for me, of course. I live in daily bliss. It might be instructive to note, however, that on the day of the death of the artist three people were missing from table at the noon meal."

"That would be instructive," Meng Li said.

By the time Meng Li got the names from the innkeeper, the sliced squash had been piled into a large bowl. As he turned to go, the old man picked up a half dozen red peppers and chopped them with a steady rhythm against the heavy cutting board.

A wail of horns jerked Meng Li's heart up to his throat until he realized that it was just the musicians, warming up for their morning practice.

He walked out into the cold air of the courtyard and saw the five men sitting on wooden benches with the valves and bows of their instruments pointing out at odd angles. Their breath coalesced into a large cloud above them and rose into the crystal blue sky. A flock of geese flying south honked an irreverent counterpoint to their disjointed composition.

Meng Li nodded to the conductor and took a seat across the courtyard, listening while the musicians screeched and hooted and

turned knobs and valves. Finally satisfied, they held a mumbled conference and then launched into an overture to the morning.

The music was quite pleasant, Meng Li thought. He imagined these men, decked out in their finery, three dancing girls whirling in front of them, playing at the court of the Prefect of Hubei.

When the innkeeper's wife announced that breakfast was ready, the men, including the conductor, dropped their instruments and scattered. Only the young flutist stayed, puttering around with his wooden instrument. Meng Li waited for a moment and then spoke up. "It must have been lonely these last few days in the mountains, what with all these older gentlemen and only a few young people your own age."

The flutist shrugged. "Musicians are used to traveling."

"And a goodlooking young musician like you must also be used to gaining the attention of many young ladies."

The musician took a step towards Meng Li, gripping his instrument as if he were going to beat him with it.

"Why did you come out here, Poet? To listen to us practice, or to assault me with foolish questions?"

"The questions!" Meng Li clapped his hands, lifted his feet and rolled back and forth on his bench in laughter. "You are quite right. I am a very clumsy investigator. So let me use the techniques of my true craft and come right to the point. You were the lover of the young acrobat, but when the artist Liang Wun-kai arrived here at the Inn of the Sleeping Dragon, he stole her affections away from you. And so you followed him up to the top of the mountain and pushed him off a cliff, thereby eliminating the competition and winning the heart of the fair maiden."

The flutist narrowed his eyes in disgust.

"If that weren't so ridiculous, I'd beat you senseless."

Meng Li's eyes shone. "Marvelous. But tell me why it's ridiculous."

"Because I don't climb mountains, that's why. And I've met many young women in my travels. I will not allow a mere girl to drive me beyond the bounds of civilized behavior."

"That sets you apart from the rest of mankind," Meng Li said. "Where were you during the noon meal on the day artist Liang Wun-kai was killed?"

"When we are trapped without activity, I don't like to eat three full meals each day. Round-bottomed gourds shouldn't perform at royal courts."

"Well said. I think you must be somewhat of a poet yourself."

"I've tried my hand at it."

"And painting?"

"That, too."

"You are a versatile man."

"One tries to keep busy."

"Then where were you three days ago, at the noon meal?"

"Hiking." When he noticed Meng Li staring at him, he continued. "For the exercise."

"Up the mountains?"

"No. Along the rim of the canyon."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Only the geese."

Meng Li sighed. "Yes. They are keen observers of our human folly."

The innkeeper had not yet cleaned out the room of Liang Wunkai. His possessions were few. Extra scrolls of paper for his drawings, an ink stone, and a few extra brushes. His clothing was neatly piled into a small bundle in the corner and was wrapped in a large silk bandanna. His hat and his shoes were gone, and his sleeping mat lay folded on the wood-slat floor.

What surprised Meng Li were the drawings. They were unlike anything he had ever seen. Not the towering mountain landscapes that sprang from the imaginations of Chinese artists, but realistic landscapes, of rolling hills and gently flowing rivers. And the studies of animals were not filled with a demonic quality but actually looked like real animals, in all their indifference and stupidity. It was the people that surprised him most, however. They sat or moved or reclined in natural positions, not the artificial poses Meng Li was used to. And they looked like real people—exactly like real people—not the stylized renditions dictated by long tradition. This dead artist was strange. He worked in a world Meng Li had not seen touched by other artists of the Central Kingdom. A world of reality.

The next stop was at the room of the second person who had not been at table for the noon meal: the old and revered artist, Chan Bai-hua. Meng Li had heard of Chan. He was maybe not good enough to have his work admired through the ages, but good enough to be a favorite at the provincial courts of central China.

The old man bade Meng Li enter. He was formally attired, and

long, creased lines led down from his sad eyes to the wispy white beard on his chin.

"The purpose of my visit, Master Chan, is to respectfully inquire as to your whereabouts three days ago during the noon meal."

"Is this about the young artist?"

"Yes."

Master Chan shook his head.

"So sad to lose a young talent."

"Yes. Did you go out that day?"

"Not at all. I was in this room, by myself, working on these."

His loosely sleeved arm swept around the small room.

Black and white paintings of fantastic landscapes and marvelously posed demons and heroes filled the room. Nice, Meng Li thought, but not inspired.

"Did anyone visit you?"

"Not all day. Now, young poet, will you please leave an old man to his work? My health weakens every day, and I have not much time."

"Yes, sir."

Meng Li bowed as he left the room.

Spraying water leapt out of the stream as the robust old woman pounded laundry against a rock. Meng Li spoke up.

"What could be more work, Honorable Aunt, than taking care of a troupe of young acrobats?"

"Right you are, sir. And I'm glad somebody recognizes it. I work from sunup to sundown every day, and what do I get for it? Dried out hands and a sore back."

Meng Li pulled back the pan of wet laundry for her and slid the other one, filled with the unwashed, down to the edge of the stream.

"Thank you, sir. And it's a terrible thing that happened. A young man getting killed. And how do our young acrobats react? They still frolic and play as if nothing had happened. I tell you, sir, the world is doomed unless these young people start to take life more seriously and live up to their responsibilities."

She lifted a sequined garment.

"Would you look at these things? Liquor stains everywhere."

"Didn't any of the acrobats mourn the passing of the young artist?"

"Oh, sure. One of them did. The youngest. You know, the one who swings from the rafters and stands at the top of the human

pyramid with her skinny little arms held out. I think she had more than a passing interest in the artist, if you know what I mean, sir. But that could have come out of desperation." She shook her head. "These young girls these days."

"Desperation?"

"If you ask me—and please don't be telling this to anyone else, sir—she had herself a little mishap during our last stop at Chengdu."

"Mishap?"

"Pregnant, sir. An old woman knows these things. Especially when you do their laundry."

"Who got her pregnant?"

"Hard to tell." She shook her head again. "These girls these days. But when she met that young artist, maybe she thought she had herself a way out of her dilemma. By marrying him."

"His death must have caused her much grief."

"She'll get over it. Especially when she finds another man to pin her troubles on."

The woman kept talking and pounding the laundry and didn't notice when Meng Li slipped back up the trail that led to the Inn of the Sleeping Dragon.

Yelps and whoops filled the hall as the acrobats twirled in joyful abandon. Meng Li stood amazed at the spinning display and could only marvel at their strength and dexterity. Finally the troupe leader called a halt and gave the acrobats barked instructions as to what time to be back for the next practice session. The acrobats wandered off, patting their foreheads with red cloths.

Xiao Lan found Meng Li.

"Did you enjoy our exercises?" she said.

"Very much."

Tiny pearls of perspiration covered her forehead. Not nearly enough, Meng Li thought, for the amount of exertion she had expended. Her eyes were large and brown and trusting.

"Have you found the killer?"

"I'm not sure," Meng Li said. "This is a very complex case."

The girl crossed her arms and pouted.

"Surely it must have been Shang-nam, the flutist."

Meng Li repressed a laugh at her guesswork.

"Why would a flutist kill an artist?"

"Because of me."

"He was jealous?"

"Yes."

"No human being is immune from jealousy," Meng Li said. "But if anyone is, it might be a wandering musician."

The girl's forehead crinkled.

"Humph. And I've heard that all your poetry is not worth even half a line from the brush of the great Tu Fu."

She stormed off. Meng Li thought that she was right about his poetry and about Tu Fu. He also figured he wouldn't be swinging from the rafters again anytime soon.

That night after dinner Meng Li took a long walk through the hills and streams of the Dabie Mountains. Twigs and branches snapped behind him, but when he turned to look, no one was there. Maybe it was his imagination, but nevertheless, he stayed away from cliffs and returned to the inn without mishap.

The exercise helped him sleep soundly, and two hours before sunrise he was at his desk working on a poem by the guttering light of a candle. As the first glimmer of dawn peeked through the window he blew out the candle, unrolled a clean scroll of paper, and dipped his brush into the black ink. The convoluted characters poured onto the page in firm, even strokes. When he was finished, he held up his work to look at it.

Maybe it was the best work he had ever done.

Maybe it was just the foolish prattlings of a novice investigator.

He couldn't tell.

He washed his face, put on his clothes, and walked down the hallway to the room of the killer.

The killer was dressed, sitting at his desk, waiting for Meng Li.

"How did you know?"

"Through the process of considering one, tossing it aside, and then going onto the next, until only one is left."

"Did you consider strangers?"

"No. There was no robbery. So my first thought was to suspect the musician. Jealousy is a fine motive for murder, but in this young man, it is an emotion which has not as yet set firm roots. And besides, he is very aggressive, and I doubt that Liang Wunkai would have stood next to a precipice while the ex-lover of his current paramour approached him for a chat. No, it seems certain that there would have been a struggle before either one of them went over the cliff."

"Then what about the girl?"

"She certainly had the artist's trust. And if she got close enough to the precipice she has the strength to push him off. But why would she? She was pregnant, and Liang Wun-kai was her salvation."

"Unless he spurned her."

"Yes. I considered that possibility. But she came to me requesting an investigation. And anyway, the Master of Acrobats is much too stern a taskmaster to allow her enough time during the day to slip up to the top of a mountain, murder her lover, and then return, unwinded, to her acrobatic exercises."

The old man sighed and his shoulders seemed to shrink into his sides.

Meng Li spoke first. "Tell me why."

"You already know why, Poet."

"Maybe I do. But I want you to tell me."

Carefully, Master Chan set down his brush.

"The traditions of the Central Kingdom were established four thousand years ago during the reign of the Duke of Chou. There are good reasons for all these traditions, but quite often young people come along who want to overturn them."

Meng Li thought of the old washerwoman; her reverence for the past, her mistrust of the future.

"Artist Liang Wun-kai thought he had discovered a new technique. The technique of portraying reality in art. The young fool went so far as to take his ink and his brushes and his scrolls up to the mountain with him, to catch better the details of the landscape, instead of letting the visions settle into his mind and then bringing them out in their superior, rearranged form once he had returned to the solitude of his study. He thought his method to be an improvement over tradition. But he was mistaken. This blasphemy was tried during ancient times and discarded, for two major reasons. First, it is inferior to the wanderings of the imagination. When the artist dreams, he has no shackles, nothing to tie him down. He may soar through the universe and make of a landscape what a landscape should be. Or make of the portrait of a hero what a hero should be."

"Or a demon?"

Master Chan focused his eyes on Meng Li.

"Yes. Even a demon can be made to be what a demon should be. But these things are unimportant when compared to the second

reason. Reality corrupts. The direct representation of things will lead people into depravity. If mankind doesn't have ideals that transcend human reality, we as a race will never improve. People will be sucked into the mud of impropriety and never soar with the proud geese, winging their way southward to the homes of the ancients."

"Are you afraid that reality in art might lead them into thinking too much about their current lives?" Meng Li said.

Almost imperceptibly, tiny muscles bunched beneath the loose flesh of the old man's jaws. Meng Li continued.

"If they see real people in real landscapes doing real things—heroic things, marvelous things—they might start to get ideas. They might start to believe that it's not only the kings and the emperors and the great heroes from the past who can do marvelous things, but that they can do them also. And if they see realistic paintings that show the squalor in which they live and the splendor in which their masters live and that portray the fleshly realities of the unimpressive bodies of their superiors, they might begin to be filled with a sense of power. A sense that they can change things."

Master Chan had turned his face away. Meng Li rapped his knuckles on the desk.

"This is what you're trying to avoid, isn't it, Master Chan?"

Words sputtered through the old man's lips.

"You're young, and foolish. You don't know what powers you're fooling with."

Meng Li shrugged. "Maybe I do."

"I followed him," Master Chan said. "To the top of Moonglow Precipice and watched him unravel his scroll and pull out his brush and sketch exactly the things he saw in front of him, and when I couldn't stand it any more, I walked up, chatted with him for a while, and then pushed him. Yes, I did it. And I'm proud I did it."

Footsteps hurried down the hall. Both men fell silent and stared at the door. It bulged with a knock. Meng Li got to his feet and opened it. It was Xiao Lan. She stood with her arms crossed, right hip outthrust. "So it's you two making all the racket, is it?"

Without an invitation, she walked in and sat down near Master Chan's desk. She looked up at Meng Li.

"Have you decided to turn Shang-nam in to the magistrate for murdering Liang Wun-kai?"

Meng Li sat back down and slowly shook his head.

"No, Little Orchid, I have not."

"Why not?"

"Because he is not the killer."

"Then who is?"

She looked back and forth between the two men.

Master Chan sat stiffly, proudly, waiting for Meng Li to speak.

Finally Meng Li took a deep breath and shook his head.

"There is no killer, Little One. Liang Wun-kai brought his death upon himself. He was too bold. He took too many chances. It was his own fault."

Xiao Lan looked at the two men. Her mouth fell open as if she were about to say something, but instead she stood up and bolted from the room.

Master Chan kept his eyes down as Meng Li slowly rose to his feet and walked out.

At the Provincial Court of Henan the acrobatic troupe drew admiring crowds. Meng Li stood on the edge of the crowd. A brightly attired official nudged him.

"Say, Poet Meng, who is that young girl atop the human pyramid? She keeps looking at you."

"That young girl?" Meng Li said. "She is the future of China."

The official chuckled. "She seems angry at you."

"No," Meng Li said. "Not angry. Just disappointed."

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

A Ghoul and His Money

by C. M. Kornbluth



It was the first time in twenty years of handling pottery that I'd ever dropped a piece. It smashed to bits on the tile floor, and a twenty dollar gold piece rolled out.

My assistant, Mr. Linehan, picked it up and said, with his customary ill-advised sense of humor, "Maybe we ought to smash the rest of them, eh, doc?"

I reminded him coolly that my title was "doctor," took the eagle from him, and put it in my pocket. We began to assemble the fragments of the piece that had broken. It proved to be a quart jug, one-eared, of a raw-earth color fired with a peculiar transparent crackle-glaze over the bisque body. When I picked up the piece inked with the catalogue number, I looked in my ledger.

"American Ceramics Gallery," said the page, "#6684503, gift of Hannes Schlectman, Reading, Pa. 3/5/39—thrown and fired *circa* 1920, maker unknown, insured \$10."

Mr. Linehan showed me a circular groove in the base of the jug where the coin had been hidden and suggested, only half humorously, I fear, that we split the value of the coin between us and say nothing of the affair.

I assured him that I would, of course, make a full report of the affair to my immediate superior, the curator of ceramics, and turn the eagle over to him. Mr. Linehan was visibly disappointed as I left for the curator's office.

The curator looked up the piece in his own files and marveled that so ordinary a piece had been accorded a place in the museum, even the American Gallery. I hotly resented this slur on my department, and I regret to say that there were words between us that culminated in my ejection from his office at the hands of his secretary.

There was a subsequent exchange of formal memoranda between us, and within the week he hailed me up before the Board of Museum Trustees' regular meeting.

I stated my grievance frankly, though as temperately as possible, to the trustees, who seemed to be having a difficult time controlling their tempers. One actually held a newspaper before his face, and I observed the paper shake as though he were trembling with the effort of repressing harsh words against the shockingly unprofessional conduct of my colleague.

The chairman gravely promised me that the matter would receive their immediate attention and asked me to withdraw while it was discussed. Waiting in the anteroom I heard some laughter

within. Doubtless one of them had told some humorous anecdote to relieve the tension of my hearing.

I was summoned to enter and was informed that I had been granted a month's vacation with pay. It was slyly pointed out that the curator was due to retire within the month, and that thus a difficult situation would be relieved without the necessity of censuring him publicly.

I determined to spend my vacation in the field. Mr. Linehan coarsely suggested that I investigate the contents as well as the composition of some American jugs. I of course treated the remark with the contempt it deserved and made ready for my expedition.

In the course of preparations I realized that I had not yet turned over the gold piece, and in fact that no one had officially required me to do so. I had a jeweler braze a small loop to it and hung it on my watch chain beside my Phi Beta Kappa key.

A fragment of the broken vase which I had retained excited my curiosity. I easily recognized the clay as a refined seaboard kaolin of the East Coast, and careful analysis and tabulation of the impurities convinced me that it was native to central Pennsylvania. The glaze, as I have said, was unfamiliar.

I determined to spend my month in the field investigating the origin of the piece. It would result at the least in a fascinating paper to read at one of my "Little Talks on Pots" which have been received with so much enthusiasm by habitués of the museum.

There is no need for me to itemize the hardships of the journey. Suffice it to say that for three whole days together I subsisted entirely on hamburger sandwiches and cups of dubious coffee consumed in roadside cafes, with truck chauffeurs and salesmen for my sole companions.

Professor Schroon of Witterburg College, a small but venerable institution on the outskirts of Reading, finally was able to identify the clay for me. He localized it to a long stratum parallel to the Wappaconsie River. On his maps it was evident that the only considerable settlement on that small stream was the town of Vleetsburg, rejoicing in a population of one thousand.

Despite his urging that I stay the night, I promptly set off for Vleetsburg itself. Truth to tell, Professor Schroon's views on the influence of Delft blue-tile ware in American ceramics were most unsound, and I feared that if I had stayed so long as another hour we should have arrived at a difference of opinion and that possibly unfortunate words would have been exchanged.

I arrived at Vleetsburg by nightfall and registered at the Commercial House, a ramshackle institution whose rates were most disproportionate to its lack of comfort. After an uncomfortable night I breakfasted on my usual dry toast and glass of warm water. Refreshed, I set out for the local library.

I introduced myself to Miss Kretzl, the librarian, and was gratified to note her respect for scholarship as exemplified by my doctorate. She was a charming person, though decidedly mature, and informed me that she had several times visited New York and the museum to which I was attached.

When I mentioned the quart jug, she instantly informed me that beyond doubt it had been the work of the late Miss Henderson of that town. "At least," Miss Kretzl added significantly, "she *called* herself Miss."

To my natural question she replied, with some relish, that Miss Henderson had been married to a man named Hobbet who had abused and finally deserted her after a final, terrible beating which had caused his wife to lose an expected child. Mrs. Hobbet had then resumed her maiden name and—here Miss Kretzl leaned across her desk and whispered piercingly, with dismay in her voice—had gone to *work*.

I myself, of course, am liberal about such matters and believe that women are quite capable of labor nearly equal to that of men, though in their proper sphere, of course. But I did not betray my advanced views to the librarian, heeding the adage, "When in Rome do as the Romans."

She continued—the woman had pursued ceramic work as a hobby, there being the clay bank of the Wappaconsie to hand, and had moved to a tumbledown house left her by a relation and set it up as a pottery shed, building kilns fed with the local natural gas.

Miss Henderson, as she now called herself, worked far into the night, even on the Sabbath, making decorative and practical pieces. She sold no work in town, since the villagers disapproved of her unladylike toil, but eventually secured small, regular orders from stores in Philadelphia and New York and from a large establishment in Chicago. She lived simply and alone, worked hard every day, and died at last in 1930 of cancer, at the age of fifty-one.

I eagerly asked directions to her pottery shed and was given them. It lay well out of town to the south, on a small road which was minutely described to me.

I was about to take my leave when a gentleman came to the desk. He wore a police officer's badge in the shape of a star and carried with some ostentation a large firearm of the type which I believe is called a revolver. His nose was remarkably large and red. "Emmy," he said to Miss Kretzl, "who's the stranger?"

I was introduced to him, or rather vice versa, the librarian seeming to believe that my academic attainments outweighed the considerable age of the constable.

He was Marshal Cuppy, for thirty years the sole keeper of the peace in Vleetsburg, and though I regret to say it, he was a tedious old bore. His attention was called to the gold eagle on my watch chain—next to the "doo-dad" as he called my Phi Beta Kappa key!

He was reminded by it of a long, dull anecdote which certainly reflected on him discreditably. With many chuckles and snorts, which carried the unmistakable odor of alcohol, he informed me that there had been a bank robbery in Vleetsburg during the spring of 1919, a completely successful robbery, since he had been on a fishing trip at the time. A large sum in gold eagles and double eagles had been abstracted by two masked bandits at the time the bank opened in the morning, and the bandits had utterly disappeared, leaving not a trace behind to indicate their identity or whereabouts. Mr. Cuppy spoke at great length on the audacity and cleverness of the bandits, whom he seemed to admire rather than otherwise.

He informed me, as though it were the greatest joke in the world, that the Farmers' and Drovers' Bank had afterwards failed and been supplanted by a branch of the First National Bank of Pittsburgh.

I at length was able to make my adieux to Mr. Cuppy and Miss Kretzl, who warmly expressed the hope that I would return to her should I require any further information. I thanked her and set off for Miss Henderson's pottery shed.

It was indeed in wretched condition. I was dismayed to behold its perforated roof and peeling boards, but discomfort is no stranger to a scholar on the trail, so I plunged boldly into the debris.

There was a large room in fair preservation. It had been boarded up, and only recently had the boards failed in their guardianship. Its principal feature was a long workbench, dusty with plaster and surmounted by several large bats. Perhaps I should explain that a bat is the heavy plaster disc used by potters as a base for flat work and plaques.

There was a great tub of long-dried raw clay, of an interesting, friable consistency, a pair of potter's wheels once powered by an electric motor now removed, a shelf of trays containing dried slips of various colors, and several pots and jars of glaze. I sampled them all, slipping a bit of each into one of the envelopes I had brought.

In an outbuilding were three large refractory kilns of amateurish appearance. One was obviously of a later construction than the other two. I attempted to open them, and the newer one and one of the older pair I was able to open with little trouble.

The other, older kiln appeared to have been sealed with a high-temperature cement of the toughest grade. Breathless with excitement, I attacked the cement with a sledge hammer which once had been used to set seggers, no doubt. I hoped against hope that sealed within I should find a long-neglected sample of the potter's art intact.

The cement gave way at last. I was chagrined to discover that the kiln contained nothing but a quantity of organic ash, not unlike the bone-ash slip used by potters of the Soong dynasty in conjunction with their lapis lazuli pigment. Though cast down, I sampled the ash and, seeing little more that could be done, left the shed.

I lunched at the Commercial House and inquired the way to the local high school. At that unpretentious institution I sent in my card to the principal, who welcomed me enthusiastically and inquired as to whether he could be of any service to me. I secured his permission to use the chemical apparatus and reagents of his science department and, in the school's one laboratory, performed my analyses of the samples I had taken from Miss Henderson's shed.

They proved to consist of various native oxides and sulfates, meticulously ground and purified, equal in quality to the very best commercial glazes. I analyzed the ash I had found in the sealed kiln and recognized its formula with considerable surprise.

Returning to the principal, I set about questioning him tactfully on local history. The bank robbery had been "before his time," that is, he had been attending college in New York pursuing the degree of M. Sc. in education when it occurred. However, he distinctly recalled the seven days' wonder it had aroused in the town, which had been communicated to him by letters from his family and friends.

Not the least mysterious feature of the robbery had been the subsequent disappearance, after the lapse of a month, of a young

man named Bevan who had been the teller in charge at the time the bank had been robbed. There had been no thought of his complicity whatsoever, and his family had placed classified advertisements in various newspapers of the larger cities assuring him that he was under no suspicion, imploring him to return.

He never did, and it was evidently believed that he had simply abandoned his family and the town in an adventurous fling from which he had been ashamed to come back.

I jestingly remarked that there seemed to be a good deal of abandonment for so small a town, citing the reprehensible behavior of Mr. Hobbet. To my surprise the principal took my humorous comment ill, and I left in an atmosphere of some strain.

As I strolled down the central street of the town, noting with some amusement that it was called Broadway, which of course it did not resemble in the slightest respect, I was accosted by a curious and ragged individual. He assured me that he was destitute and asked of me a small loan with which to purchase a meal.

I replied that it would be false charity of me to do as he wished, and that for his own good I felt called upon to advise that he seek some honest employment, no matter how humble or arduous, explaining that bread won by labor is the best.

He protested that he was unable to secure employment, that he was indeed a skilled bank teller.

"A teller?" said I, astonished.

He explained that he had been chief teller at the Farmers' and Drovers' Bank which had failed after the robbery, and that he had not been able to occupy a position with the branch bank that succeeded it, since it had brought its own personnel from Pittsburgh. I took him into the nearest restaurant, an establishment called the Busy Bee which appeared to specialize in the hamburger sandwich and the exotic dish of chile con carne. The mendicant consumed at my bounty no fewer than three of the former and two bowls of the latter, together with two cups of hot coffee. I ordered him a portion of pie, and as he toyed with that I artfully began to question him.

He remarked that he had known young Bevan well, and ventured the opinion that he had been afraid to stay in the town, having been the only one to see the bandits face to face and fearing lest they seek to harm him.

I remonstrated that I understood the bandits to have been masked.

"You can't mask a man's walk or build," said the old fellow. "Bevan was pretty sure he recognized one of 'em, and he told the law about it. Then he left town, I figure."

"Good heavens!" I cried. Seldom though I resort to an oath, I was profoundly shocked. "Why was nothing done about it? Who was the man whom Mr. Bevan recognized?"

The fellow laughed in a manner I can only describe as cynical. "I see you don't know small towns," he said. "The man Bevan recognized was Joe Hobbet, a fellow who lived in this town and then left after kicking the blazes out of his wife. I guess I'm the only one Bevan told besides the law, and I figured if the law didn't find him I couldn't. You're the only man who's given a damn about it in twenty years. Thanks for the feed, mister."

He arose and left me to ponder. I ordered a cup of weak tea with milk and sat considering the information which had been imparted to me. I could make little of it, and left for the Commercial House. I informed the clerk that I wished to take a short nap before dining and desired not to be disturbed. He grinned broadly, for some reason or other, and assented.

In my room I removed my jacket, shoes, and vest and reclined on the bed, composing myself for slumber. The twinkle of sunlight on a bit of metal caught my eye. It was the gold piece hanging from my vest, which in turn hung from the old, painted-over gas fixture by the door.

The gold piece slowly dimmed before my eyes. It appeared to be growing dark rather early. I tried to rise from the bed to take my watch from the vest, and was dismayed at a curious lassitude which overcame me. I was almost unable to move.

Then and only then did I notice a very faint hissing sound which I had hitherto ignored. I remembered that the region abounded in odorless natural gas. I lurched to my feet in what seemed like total darkness and staggered to the window. I had not the dexterity to rotate the small lock which held it shut. I drove my head at the pane, which shattered to bits, and hung over the sill desperately gulping at the pure outside air.

After recovering my strength and sight I held my breath and crossed the room, turning off the tap of the gas jet and flinging open the door. The one bellboy of the establishment ran in and as promptly ran out. From the corridor he cried, "Don't do it, mister! Things ain't as bad as they seem and you only got one life!"

"Don't be ridiculous, young man!" I snapped at him. "I have no

intention whatsoever of taking my life. Call the manager. At *once*, if you please!"

He retreated down the rickety stairs and returned with the manager, whose principal interest in the matter seemed to be the cost of replacing the broken pane of glass. However, I demanded an instant investigation, which he reluctantly commenced.

It was seen that somebody had cleared the hole of the painted-over gas jet with a nail or similar instrument and had scratched away the paint from the tap, then turning it open. However, the gas supply for illuminating purposes was shut off at a main that rose to a standpipe at the rear of the building.

We hastened to that point and found that the rusty old valve had been forced open very recently, as chips of ferrous oxide still were scattered on the ground. Mr. Cuppy, the town marshal, appeared at this point, summoned by an excited small boy. He was surprised to find me alive, as the lad had informed him that I had been slaughtered in my bed with a butcher's knife.

After a great deal of reflection and surveying the ground, first downstairs, then in my room, and then outside again, he delivered his opinion. He believed that some person had "snuck" into my room, an easy enough matter, had worked on the gas light, gone back of the building, and bided his time until he knew me to be resting in my room. He had then forced the main valve open and departed hastily, possibly expecting an explosion to ensue if I were not already asphyxiated.

Mr. Cuppy found neither footprints nor fingerprints anywhere on the assassin's field of operations, but assured me he had a "theory" as to the identity of the malefactor. He promised to leave no stone unturned, and departed for the restaurant surrounded by an excited knot of citizens and small boys.

Save for a slight headache I was thoroughly recovered from my exposure. I returned to my room and donned my vest, my jacket, and my shoes, which, I regret to say, I had forgotten to put on before descending to the street. I was surprised to find the gold piece gone from my chain.

Good riddance! thought I. It has brought me nothing but trouble and disorder. Therefore, polishing my Phi Beta Kappa key until it shone as if it would outdo the missing ornament, I descended to the dining room of the Commercial House to sup upon my usual dry toast and omelette, washed down by a refreshing cup of weak tea.

A postprandial stroll found me in the vicinity of Miss Henderson's pottery shed as the sun was going down. I went within and waited for possibly ten minutes before hearing a heavy foot stumbling on the shed's entrance.

"You are late, Mr. Cuppy," said I coolly.

The man had an electric torch which he rudely turned full in my eyes: "How'd ye know 'twas me?" he demanded.

"Tut, sir!" I chided him. "It's futile for a layman to match wits with the trained intellect of a scholar. It was the veriest child's play to assemble those facts which have come to my attention."

"You ain't playin' with children now," he said grimly. "Tell me right quick where the stuff is, mister, or I'll fill ye with lead."

"Please," I remonstrated. "I shall be happy to tell you. But first I should like to know how you ensured the silence of Miss Henderson, or rather, Mrs. Hobbet? I cannot understand her complicity in the murder of Mr. Bevan."

"You're crazier'n hell," he said disgustedly. "She never knew the first damn thing about Bevan. I killed him and buried him in Miller's Creek fork myself after Hobbet skipped with the gold."

"One moment," I said, my senses in a whirl. "Do I understand you to say that Mr. Bevan was *buried*? And that Mr. Hobbet—who, of course, 'hid out' here with the loot after you and he had robbed the bank—ran away with the gold?"

"That's right, mister," said he. I heard a click, no doubt connected with the firearm he carried. "And I'm giving you thirty seconds to tell me where the gold is before I shoot. Nothing but gold could bring a man to a town like this. And that eagle I lifted from your vest was Philly 1915 like the rest of 'em."

"Mrs. Hobbet," said I thoughtfully, "must have been a remarkable woman, and her husband must have treated her with almost incredible brutality. Mr. Cuppy, your accomplice did not run away with your gold. He is still here, or rather, his ashes are.

"His wife, terrorized into concealing him, finally rallied her courage to kill him, dismember his body, and incinerate the parts in a kiln which she later sealed. I have analyzed the ashes which I found there; they are unquestionably the residue of a human body."

"The gold," he said grimly.

"Yes, the gold. Mrs. Hobbet was a remarkable woman, with a remarkable sense of values. She refused to return the gold to the bank, and so to the town which despised her instead of sympathizing and proffering assistance. It pleased her to embed each coin in

a piece of pottery. Why not? She earned an adequate living, and her work was her pleasure.

"Perhaps, too, she was the possessor of an unusual sense of humor. The gold is scattered over the face of the earth by now, Mr. Cuppy. No conceivable power could assemble it in one place again. Is that what you wished to know?"

He cursed horribly and continuously for a full minute. Then, in a voice trembling with rage, he snarled, "Say your prayers, mister. I couldn't gas you today, but I'm going to shoot you tonight."

"I should like a drink of that grog on the shelf, if you please," I requested. "It might make my passing less difficult."

Keeping one eye and his weapon on me, he directed the electric torch to the shelf I had indicated. It picked out the tall clay bottle labeled "Grog" in large letters. I had not been mistaken in judging his red-nosed appearance.

"I didn't know ol' Miz Henderson was a drinkin' woman," he commented. "I figger I'll just sample this—mebbe I need it more'n you." He pulled the cork, glancing sharply at me and settling the gun in his hand. He tilted back the bottle and took a great swallow.

There are two liquids called "grog." One is a concoction of rum and water favored by nautical persons, the other is a suspension of burnt clay used to counteract warpage in the firing of pottery. It was of course the latter that Mr. Cuppy swallowed, for Miss Henderson had been no drinking woman after all.

He choked noisily in astonishment. On his first spasm I seized one of the heavy plaster bats and hurled it at his hand. His gun exploded, missing me by a considerable margin. A second bat struck him in the face, and then I was upon him with a third held in my two hands.

I beat him to the floor with it and pounded him mercilessly, old as he was. After about a dozen blows on his head and neck, one apparently struck some significant spot, for he went quite limp. I removed his weapon from his hand and studied it by the light of his electric torch. By the time I had mastered its principles—unfortunately firing one bullet through the dilapidated roof—he had come to.

I marched him to the town jail, the keys of which he carried on his person, and locked him in the one cell. To the bewilderment of the citizens of Vleetsburg, who finally decided that I was a federal officer of some sort, I called the state police, who appeared within the hour.

By the light of their automobile headlamps they enthusiastically dug up the nearby fork of Miller's Creek, enlisting the aid of several townspeople. It was one of the latter whose spade struck the skull of the late Mr. Bevan.

One of the state troopers appropriated what was left of the boots and tenderly brushed away the soil, then applying a fine, white powder of talc. Some fingerprints appeared distinctly. They were Mr. Cuppy's. But when we returned to the town jail we learned the consequences of our heedlessness, for Mr. Cuppy, unwatched, had hanged himself to the barred door by his suspenders.

I was given the privilege of an interview with the lieutenant governor shortly after, who presented me with a handsomely engraved badge attesting to my membership—in a purely honorary capacity, of course—in the state police of Pennsylvania.

I took good care to place the badge well down in my suitcase when I started back for New York and the museum. If my assistant, Mr. Linehan, should see the thing, I'd never hear the last of it. He has a decidedly ill-advised sense of humor most inappropriate in one pursuing the scholar's vocation.

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

The farmer's turkey is the cheapest.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



In Shakespeare's day, lawyers were apparently held in such low esteem that a character's exhortation to kill them all elicited appreciative guffaws from playgoers. But today's attorneys (the female ones, at least) are cropping up as the protagonists in a rash of recently published crime fiction.

Jeffery Wilds Deaver was nominated for an Edgar for his earlier *Manhattan Is My Beat*. Now he's introduced Taylor Lockwood in a ripper of a novel titled **Mistress of Justice** (Doubleday, \$18.50). By day she's a Wall Street paralegal; by night she strokes and smokes the keys at any jazz piano bar that will hire her. Suddenly she's plucked from the steno pool to act as aide-de-camp to the firm's most eligible bachelor, a rising careerist who's misplaced a very valuable document. This is fresh and funky; I loved it.

Lia Matera gets better and better, but her latest, **A Hard Bargain**, will be hard to beat. This is a Laura DiPalma mystery, darker and more psychological than Matera's other series, substituting suspense and a moral quandary for lighthearted wit. The result is a rich brew, strong and satisfying. (Simon & Schuster, \$18.50)

Principal Defense by Gini Hartzmark (Ballantine, \$5.99) stars Chicago heiress and successful acquisitions lawyer Katharine Milholland. She's fierce about defending a hostile takeover of a company founded by her erstwhile lover, but the waters soon muddy when the man's ward, his teenage niece, is murdered. It's obvious that there's someone in the strategy room who's playing for the highest stakes of all: life or death.

Seattle is home to lawyer Annie MacPherson. **Practice to De-**

ceive (Fawcett, \$18) by Janet L. Smith is her second murder case. Annie and her partner have been made a lucrative offer to join the city's most prestigious law firm, so they close their tiny practice. When the senior partner's secretary kills herself, everyone assumes that her affair with her boss had soured—everyone, that is, but the dead woman's angry sister. (If this is an insider's accurate view of a highpowered law firm, one begins to understand Shakespeare's opinion of the breed.) Annie puts herself above office politics, and soon finds that that may be a precarious place to live. If someone decides to let her live, that is.

Dick Lochte is the author of *Laughing Dog* and *Sleeping Dog* (a Nero Wolfe award winner and one of my all-time favorite funny mysteries). Now he's taken us to New Orleans and Cajun country in **Blue Bayou** (Simon & Schuster, \$18.50), where P.I. Terry Manion has just come out of alcohol rehab to learn that his best friend has committed suicide. Or has he? Finding the truth is a twisted path, but Lochte's rendition makes the trip well worthwhile.

Robert Crais' hero, P.I. Elvis Cole, is back in **Lullaby Town** (Bantam, \$18.50), and it's a dilly. Don't let the title fool you: Crais writes of Tinseltown in a breezy style, while his plot will keep you awake, reading into the night. (Look for it in paperback soon.)

Fans of Dick Francis should pick up the suspense novels of Sam Llewellyn, a British writer whose books have a background of boatyards, yacht racing, and generally nautical lore. The latest, **Blood Knot** (Pocket Books, \$20), is certainly a seaworthy craft, with a likeable hero, lots of background, and a knotty plot.

I like Stewart Hoag, the once fairhaired boy of the New York literary scene, on top of the world, and married to Broadway's most glamorous star. But in this fourth entry in Jane Haddam's series, **The Woman Who Fell From Grace**, Hoagy himself has fallen from grace. Now he lives humbly, and usually alone, with his basset hound Lulu. He earns his living ghost-writing celebrity books. This time he's called in by a desperate publisher to collaborate on a sequel with the daughter and trustee of Alma Glaze, deceased author of the all-time bestseller *Oh, Shenandoah*. Sound familiar? It should; and that's only a small part of the fun in this very witty series. I like to think these are the bonbons of the crime fiction genre, certainly not hearty fare for the meat-and-potatoes private eye folks. (Bantam, \$4.99)

Another fresh and offbeat hero is Dallas Murphy's Artie Deemer (*Lover Man*), who has finally reappeared in **Lush Life** (Pocket Books, \$20). Here's another man with a dog. Artie, however, man-

ages to live comfortably off his best friend (and pet): Jellyroll is the spokesdog for a national brand of dogfood. A lively new character in the person of a professional pool player named Crystal Spivey brings love into Artie's life, but the romance comes with some dangerous baggage.

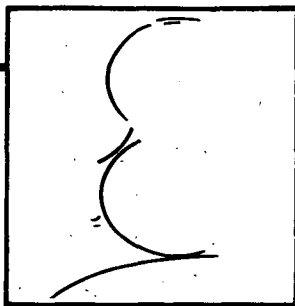
Sharyn McCrumb's sequel to *If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O* has a shorter title, **The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter** (Scribners, \$19), but packs no less a punch. Beautiful Appalachia and its small town sheriff are both back, along with two teenagers who have come home to discover the bodies of their entire family, apparently victims of a murder-suicide committed by their older brother. McCrumb writes hauntingly of lies and secrets shared by small towns, and pain that can explode in violence. This was a book that deserved to be sipped, but I lacked the patience. I gulped it down in one sitting.

Intrepid campus cop Peggy O'Neill is back in her fourth adventure by M. D. Lake. **A Gift for Murder** (Avon, \$4.50) is centered around The Tower, a writer's collective that's housed in a once-grand mansion. Over the years a few of the aspiring writers have gone on to glory—or, at least, on to generous publishing advances. Now one of their original group has come home. But is it to reminisce, to gloat, or to wreak his vengeance on the old gang? When the author is a no-show at his much-publicized reading, Peggy makes it her job to find out. Peggy is smart, sassy, and incurably curious; watching her search for the truth among a group of professional storytellers is a rare treat.

Schoolteacher/sleuth Amanda Pepper returns in Gillian Roberts' **I'd Rather Be in Philadelphia** (Ballantine, \$18). An anonymous scribbled plea for protection against an abusive husband turns up in a book Amanda accidentally picked up at her school's book bazaar. As she searches for the original owner, her sense of urgency mounts. Roberts manages to turn up the burner on this sizzler of a thriller without ever losing her wry sense of humor, and that's only a part of the pleasure here for readers.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Hitchcock, in what began as a necessity when he needed an extra for a scene, pleased his audiences by making cameo appearances in his works. In **Innocent Blood**, the latest film from director John Landis, there's a brief shot of The Master carrying a bass fiddle (trivia question: from which film is this scene?). But to paraphrase Senator Lloyd Bentsen, I've seen Hitchcock classics, and believe me, this is no Hitchcock classic.

Instead, what we do have is an amusing, quirky story that teams up a cop and a beautiful vampire whose common goal is to destroy the head of a powerful organized crime family.

Joe Gennaro (Anthony LaPaglia) is the cop. After spending three years undercover infiltrating the mob, he's about to crack the case and toss top

gangster Sal "Sally the Shark" Macelli into the clink.

After all that work, however, his cover is blown and the mob wants to get him, badly.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Pittsburgh, where this bloody story takes place, lives a shapely young woman who's hungry and expresses a desire for "Italian." And it's not Domino's pizza she has in mind. We're first introduced to lovely Marie (Anne Parillaud) in her room, which is baroquely illuminated with dozens of little candles. There she wears only a smile as she plots her next meal.

After Marie feasts on crime boss Macelli, she is forced to flee before finishing the job. Macelli, in turn, becomes one of the living dead and seeks to turn his own henchmen into vampires as well. Naturally, he must be stopped before a force

of undead mobsters becomes more powerful than anything the authorities have ever grappled with.

Just as naturally, after a somewhat rocky start (they hate each other) the cop and the vampire fall for each other and wind up in the sack. This seals their partnership in what must be one of the more unusual cinematic crimefighting duos. Batman and Robin, look out!

If there's one film that *Innocent Blood* brings to mind, it's another John Landis effort, *An American Werewolf in London*, the 1981 Wolfman send-up.

This time around, the lovely vampire's appetite offers a number of bloody scenes. But the gore is of a cartoonish stripe, making the violence inoffensive. For the most part, the acting makes up for any holes in the plot. Sure, there's little suspense and even less mystery in this comic melodrama, but on the whole, it's a hoot.

Don Rickles nearly steals the show with his zany portrayal of Macelli's lawyer, Manny Bergman. He looks like Uncle Fester and acts like, well, Don Rickles.

Veteran actor Robert Loggia seems to have a grand time as

the bloodsucking Godfather. He is hilarious when he feasts on frozen steaks from Manny's freezer as if they were Pop-sicles.

Anthony LaPaglia, as the cop, shows earnestness in a situation which is totally wacky.

French actress Anne Parillaud is delicious as the star vampire in her American film debut. She's also a head turner with the looks of *Northern Exposure's* Janine Turner.

Aside from the fine acting, a number of small touches, added up, make for a fun film experience. When one mobster, who's picked up Marie for a parking session, looks through his CD collection for some romantic music, we see a dozen Sinatra albums and that's all. He picks, of course, *That Old Black Magic*.

Finally, you might say the whole thing is a comment on modern day male-female relationships.

After the cop and the vampire become romantically involved, she warns him, "I take lives, you know."

His response: "Yeah, well, if you were perfect, you wouldn't still be single."

Hitchcock's cameo, by the way, is from *Strangers on a Train*.

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious by Thomas Buice of able mentions go to Richard see; Andy Dequasie of Pow-Sacramento, California; Thomas C. Martin of Sarasota, Florida; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Jan Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Deborah Pappada of Cortland, Ohio; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Walter Patrick Smith of Penn Valley, California.



Photograph contest was won Belleview, Florida. Honor-Tanner of Kingsport, Tennessee; Vermont; Toni Potter of Sacramento, California; Thomas C. Martin of Sarasota, Florida; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Jan Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Deborah Pappada of Cortland, Ohio; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Walter Patrick Smith of Penn Valley, California.

Photo by Alginantas Kezys

BANK ROBBING 101 by Thomas Buice

"Rob a bank, you say? Whatever happened to fraternity chug-lugs and telephone booth packing? Well, if it's advice on robbing banks you want, you've come to the right person."

"But, Mr. Johnson . . ."

"Save your questions till I get done, kid. I really don't understand why you wanted me to teach you all here on this bridge. It's not very private. More excitement, I suppose."

"Mr. Johnson, could I just . . ."

"I promise, son, I'll answer all questions afterwards. Number one rule for robbing banks: know your security systems well. First National over there, for example, they . . ."

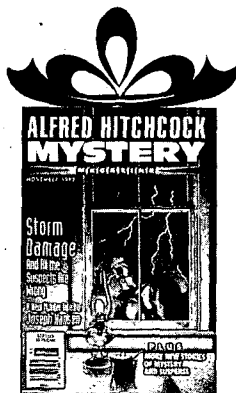
"Please, Mr. Johnson, I . . ."

"Number two rule: spy out the weak link in the teller windows. The older tellers are less apt to cause a scene or make trouble."

"But wedon't want to rob a bank. At least not that kind of bank. The only thing we lack, completing our initiation, is stealing that tin soldier off the riverbank down there under this bridge."

"Ten soldiers, you say? Well, if it's advice on strategy in warfare you want, you've come to the right person. Number one rule for . . ."

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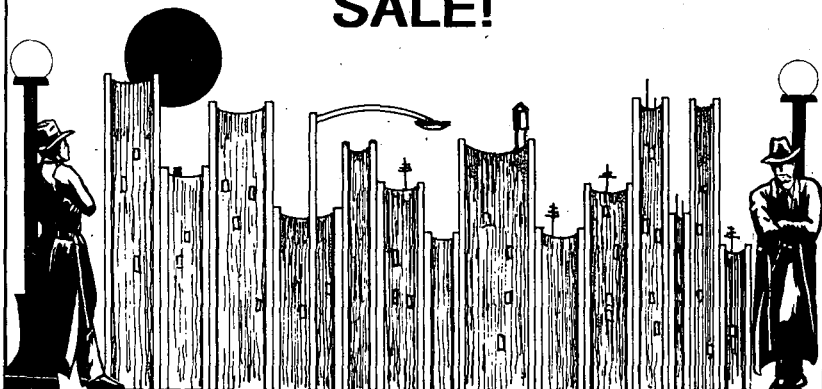
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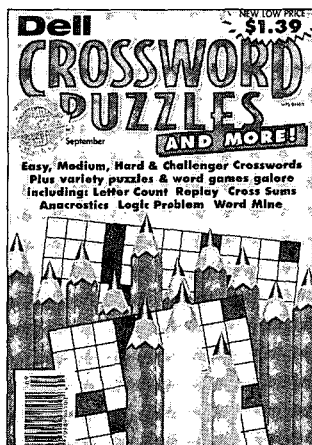
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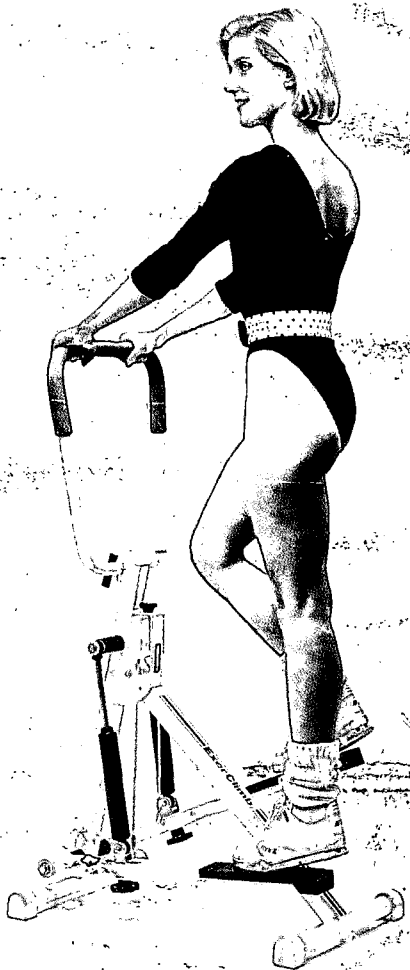
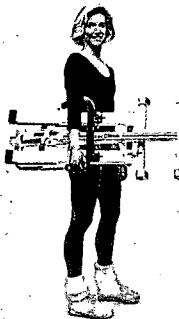
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